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THE DELIVERANCE

**BOOKS BY
DILIP KUMAR ROY**

AMONG THE GREAT

CONVERSATIONS WITH

**MAHATMA GANDHI
ROMAIN ROLLAND
BERTRAND RUSSELL
RABINDRANATH TAGORE
SRI AUROBINDO**

EYES OF LIGHT

POEMS

DWIJENDRALAL ROY

A BIOGRAPHY

MEWAR PATAN

(FALL OF MEWAR)

A DRAMA BY DWIJENDRALAL ROY

TRANSLATED WITH HARINDRANATH CHATTOPADHYAY.

SARAT CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAYA

THE DELIVERANCE

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL BENGALI

BY

DILIP KUMAR ROY

REVISED BY

SRI AUROBINDO

WITH A PREFACE BY

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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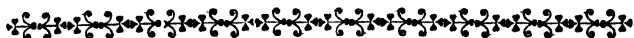
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DEDICATED TO

SIR SARVAPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF HIS
APPRECIATION OF THINGS OF
VALUE IN BENGALI CULTURE

DILIP KUMAR ROY



DILIP,

What is stamped on SARATCHANDRA's photograph, everywhere, is a large intelligence, an acute and accurate observation of men and things and a heart full of sympathy for sorrow and suffering. Too sensitive to be quite at ease with the world and also perhaps too clear-sighted. Much fineness of mind and refinement of the vital nature.

March, 1935

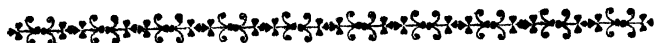
SRI AUROBINDO

PREFACE

THE early epoch of Bengali prose suggests its parallel in the beginning of the biological age on this earth when its animal creations were cumbersome in their gait lacking in a rhythm submissive to life. Though the time is not remote yet it seems to us belonging almost to a pre-historic period of evolution when Bengali prose painfully struggled on with its adynamic grammar and a vocabulary containing words that were mostly inert and colourless. Our own growing intimacy with the modern European mind and its manner of expression reacted upon our language giving it more and more freedom of movement and the pliancy in its functions. During a remarkably rapid course of self-discovery it has developed the courage to be able to cross the orthodox enclosure of a pseudo-classical form of literature rigid in its ceremonialism. This freedom has brought our fiction close to the everyday life of the people, a large section of which was formerly shunned as untouchable in our domain of culture. The latest of the leaders who, through this path of liberation, has guided Bengali novels nearer to the spirit of modern world literature is SARATCHANDRA CHATTERJI. He has imparted a new power to our language and in his stories has shed the light of a fresh vision upon the too familiar region of Bengal's heart revealing the living significance of the obscure trifles in people's personality. He has achieved the best reward of a novelist : he has completely won the hearts of Bengali readers.

“ Uttarayan ”
Santiniketan, Bengal,
March, 1935.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THE rise of SARAT CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAYA in Bengali literature was sudden and brilliant and there never has been since his death (in 1938) a waning of his rich popularity. There have been few writers in any literature whose greatness has been, from the start, so universally compelling. When his juvenile stories, written in the 'nineties, first saw the light, they moved even the most finical of critics to admiration and his "Baradidi," a story of deep pathos and delicious humour, was handled with such a masterly craftsmanship that many decided that TAGORE had written it under a nom de plume. For SARATCHANDRA was then an unknown clerk in a Railway Accountant's Office in Rangoon.

“ Baradidi ” (“ the eldest sister ”) is the story of an absent-minded young man of an aristocratic family, who leaves his home and seeks refuge as a tutor in the household of a wealthy land-holder whose widowed daughter (the eldest sister) unwittingly falls in love with him while ministering to his daily needs. The distinctiveness of the love-episode lies in the deep invisibility of the widow who remains all along behind the purdah and yet the love of the two grows imperceptibly through her little sister, the tutor’s pupil, who acts as their unconscious intermediary.

This fascinating story had been written by SARAT CHANDRA when he was barely two and twenty. But he had yet to put all doubts as to his greatness out of court. This he achieved by his famous story of the conversion of Rama (“ Ramer Sumati ”). It is the story of the devilments of a boy who is mothered by his elder brother’s wife and hated by all others. Its pathos is of a nature that baffles analysis.

Then SARAT CHANDRA went on producing novels and novelettes in rapid succession. Some of these shocked while others delighted his readers : only a few fell flat. This is no mean achievement when the creator’s genius is as prolific as SARAT CHANDRA’S. It is difficult to find a story of his which fails to grip. What is no less remarkable about his genius is its astonishing ability to maintain a high level of style and plot-weaving in which, after BANKIM CHANDRA of the ’sixties, he stands unsurpassed in Bengali literature. Add to this, his restraint of emotion, dis-

inctiveness of diction, intensity of expression and unerring flair for the drama which lies hidden in the most trivial concatenation of events,—and it will not be hard to realise why he so “completely won the hearts of Bengali readers” as even TAGORE who is usually chary of praise, testified generously. In fact it would not be too much to claim that his novels and novelettes and plays (many of which have been filmed by now) have penetrated into the homes of the humblest denizens of urban as well as rural Bengal to say nothing of the literati and the leisured connoisseurs.

SARAT CHANDRA was born in 1876. He came of a respectable Brahmin family but was reared in his boy-hood by his maternal uncle in the town of Bhagalpur, situated on a bend of the Ganges. His love of nature which so often bestars his prose with poetry is attributable to this river-side life he lived in early youth, a life chequered with swift romance and incredible adventure. His instinctive power of observation of sentient things and inanimate nature and his native sympathy which he brought to bear upon everything that fell within his purview were greatly enhanced by this nomadic life in the plastic period of his youth. And truly nomadic it was, for he revelled in danger and daring from his cradle as it were. As a lad he would sometimes spend whole nights in frail canoes on the turbulent Ganges, an experience he has superbly delineated in his “Srikanto.” Eerie cemeteries were the favourite haunts of his adolescence and caves of bandits and desperadoes beck-

oned to him in his boy-hood days. He was never so happy as in the heart of the wilderness. No chastisement, avuncular or social, could avail against an outlaw who feared neither the family-rod nor social ostracism. And no amount of tutorial discipline could break him into the respectable mould of University routine-work. Besides, fortunately for him, he was born a little too poor for our expensive University education, so much so, that he could not even deposit his Intermediate Examination fee. As a result he had to give up his studies when he was still in his teens. He had been destined, it would seem, not for the life of the deracinated intelligentsia of modern India, but for that of a true nursling of the soil, a friend of the ignored, the outcasts, "the untouchables in the domain of culture," to put it in TAGORE's words. And his keen eye seized not only "living significances of the obscure trifles in people's personality," but also the essence of nobility in the lives alike of sinners and saints in different strata of society. This he could achieve because he remained a nomad all his life and erupted continually into strange strands of society to which none but the homeless have easy access. And yet when one knew him intimately one was astonished to find that he was a man to whom all exhibitionism, even the display of his colourful vagrant life, was utterly repugnant. A loyal friend, a genial wit, a delicious anecdotist, a man of sleepless compassion and unpublished charities, he seemed to recoil under the light of publicity and was most fidgety when one alluded to his constant befriending of the desti-

tute and the misunderstood of both sexes whom he often took under his wings at manifest personal risk. But his profound and sensitive comprehension of sin and suffering in every shape and form found voice, almost in spite of himself, in his stories and novels. No truly great artist could live a submerged life for ever ; so SARAT CHANDRA was betrayed through his art into the uncongenial glare of publicity: it was an inner compulsion he could not escape. But even after his ascent to eminence he never could persuade himself to exploit human misery to build up fame as writers, chiefly of fiction, are wont to do. That is why his fiction is shot through with the life-throb and truth-throb that only intimate experience of suffering and squalor can inspire. He did not have to learn through failures that mere artistic flirtations with sorrow could never impart vividness and vigour to a work of delineation, however flawless the technique. It has been well said by VIRGINIA WOOLF that " Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts, the better the fiction." For, she rightly adds, " fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be ; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."

The duty of a translator hardly impels him to do more than introduce his subject to foreign readers. I would only point out SARAT CHANDRA's fundamental kinship with two great modern writers : DOSTOIEVSKY, the interpreter of the " insulted and the injured " and GORKY, the comrade

of "the outcast and the pariah." I hope some day his masterpiece "Srikanta," that Saga of Indian life in all its kaleidoscopic variety, will be translated in full in its five parts if only to present him to the world as a great universalist and humanist in life and art. I remember walking with him one day in rural Bengal. He suddenly paused in front of a rare creeper and tried hard to recollect if he had ever seen it before. "But why worry?" I asked laughing. "How can I help worrying so long as there is anything in life that hides its identity from me?", he replied. And this was no mere empty boast on his part. For none has known him who has known him only as a spectator of life: he was, intrinsically, a seeker after the hidden truths that life so often hurtles past unheeding. And that is why even the insignificant things and stray waifs whom we bypass have outflowered in his art with the magic of faultless contour. This is perhaps truest in his portrayal of the vastly misunderstood womankind of India. He refused to equate those who lived under deep purdah with nonentities. In the short compass of this novelle where only a cameo corner of the feminine world is limned, a foreign reader shall see something authentic about our womankind in all their strength and weakness of love, generosity and pettiness of nature, reticence and ingenuousness of character: also something of his peerless insight into both our juvenile and adult psychology in moods of war dissolving in amity. It is a small world but a real world

—a piece of moving, palpitating life of the joint-family of Bengal.

A word or two about this translation and I shall have done.

Among the great Indian writers of today SARAT CHANDRA is probably the most difficult to render into a European tongue. The reason is that he is the most Bengali of the Bengali belletrists even as DOSTOIEVSKY is the most Russian of the Russian Romanticist realists. True, he imbibed all that is best of the Western culture, but his responses and reactions to the changing times remained, to the end, ineradicably Indian. It is this which makes his expressions, his dialogues in particular, so bafflingly untranslatable. While rendering this novelette, how often have I not regretted the elusiveness of just that quintessential savour of his, that delicate picturesqueness of his homely pathos and the humour and inbred reticence of his style which have endeared him to us, Indians. I am conscious also of some other irremediable defects in my rendering. These might be less serious if I had to translate a writer who was not, what he was, a stylist of stylists. But when one ventures to transplant a supreme artist of one language into the soil of another, one must not be deterred by defeatist qualms and compunctions. A Bengali proverb puts it succinctly : “A blind uncle is better than no uncle.”

Even so, I would not have launched out into such a difficult enterprise had I not received the invaluable help of SRI AUROBINDO who revised my translation.

If there is any merit in what follows, it is, I am sure, in large measure due to him and of course to SARAT CHANDRA. They must share the credit for whatever joy the reader may derive from the perusal of this work.

DILIP KUMAR ROY

*Sri Aurobindo Asram,
Pondicherry, June, 1944.*



I

THEY were a joint-family, the Chatterjis of Bhowanipur: two brothers, Girish and Harish and their cousin Ramesh, the youngest of the three, son of a paternal uncle. In other days the family home and lands were on the banks of the Rupnarayan. Bhavani Chatterji, father of Girish, was then in very good circumstances. But the Rupnarayan in a sudden leap of insatiable hunger swallowed up all his possessions, lands and gardens, with such a gusto that in a brief five years it left him scarcely anything worth the salvage. When all the rest had gone, it swallowed as a last morsel the very house of his ancestors and rejected the poor Brahmin empty and beggared far away from its borders. A fugitive with all his family, he had sought refuge in this suburb of Calcutta.

All that was now a history of the past. Since then Girish and Harish had both become advocates, amassed property and riches, built for themselves new houses—in a word, had brought

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back, more than quadrupled, all that had been lost. Now the earnings of Girish, the eldest brother, are more than twenty-four thousand a year, while Harish too, reaches somewhere about six thousand. Only Ramesh has achieved nothing. But it could not be said that he had done nothing at all within his life. For he had conspicuously achieved more than one complete failure in his Law examinations and afterwards a no less absolute failure in a business adventure in which he had dropped a good four thousand of Girish's money. Now he sat at home in his room, very busy saving his country by writing in the newspapers.

But now after so long an existence the firm structure of this time-old joint-family was beginning to show its first crevices. The reason of this commencement of dissolution was that Harish's wife, Nayantara, and Sailaja, the wife of Ramesh, could not at all hit it off together. Harish had been all this time absent from Calcutta with his family, practising in a mofussil court. Consequently he could pay Girish only rapid visits, and although in those few days the encounters of the two ladies were not remarkable for harmony, yet they had not the time and opportunity needed for a really good collision and quarrel. But now Harish had already been a month with Girish practising at the Calcutta

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Bar, and that was long enough for peace and happiness to begin their disappearance from the household. If the disagreement between the two sisters-in-law had not mounted to its highest diapason within this ample period, it was only because Sailaja had not been at home all these days: she was called away to the town of Krishnagar where her father lay near to death and had left her only son Patal and her step-son Kanai in the care of her eldest sister-in-law Siddheswari. But now her father had recovered and Saila too was back at home for the last four or five days.

The mother of Girish and Harish was still alive, but Siddheswari, her eldest daughter-in-law, was the real *mater-familias* of the household. Perhaps in her nature there was a touch of the inscrutable, for both praise and blame were shared out to her in the scales of the public opinion of the neighbourhood in an equally extravagant measure.

Siddheswari's father and mother were still living but very poor. After five years of indefatigable effort they had gathered just enough to bring their daughter home at the time of the *Durga Pujah* vacation. But it was impossible for Siddheswari to stay there long, away from the cares of her household. After a month she was back home bringing with her from Katwa its

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native malaria. Here too she persisted in taking liberties with her health, continued her early morning baths and could not be induced to dose herself with quinine. As a natural result, the fever too continued; three or four days went well, then it came, left her and let her rise from her bed, then again came and threw her down; so she was growing daily weaker and weaker.

It was just then that Saila returned from her father's and started a relentless struggle and importunity, insisting on her submitting to regular medical treatment. She had been brought up in the family under the care of Siddheswari and so could insist and prevail with her in a way none else dared, including Nayantara. She had, besides, a yet stronger weapon from which Siddheswari shrank and because of it secretly feared her. For Saila was exceedingly hot-tempered and prone in her anger to take to severe fasts: once started, it was impossible to induce her to break her fasting by even so much as a sip of water till three full days were over. Siddheswari abhorred these fasts more than anything and the prospect of them filled her with terror.

II

SAILA'S maternal aunt lived in Pataldanga in the Northern part of the town. Since her return from Krishnagar she had not been able to make time to visit her ; but to-day she had not to cook her mother-in-law's vegetarian meal, for it was *Ekadashi*, the widow's day of fast ; so she left to Haricharan, the second son of Siddheswari, the responsibility of administering the medicine to his mother and went to Pataldanga.

It was winter and the early dusk had fallen a couple of hours ago. Since yesterday morning Siddheswari's temperature had hardly once sunk to the normal. Now in the evening, she lay crumpled up, wrapped in the folds of her quilts, like one lifeless and inert, on one portion of her great ample bedstead, upon which were three or four children screaming and shouting in a fury of play ; Kanai at the foot facing the lamplight and supposed to be learning his geography by heart--but in fact with its pages open in front of him, keenly watching the play and uproar, and at the other end Haricharan flat on his back, with a lighted lamp, lost in the book he was reading. It must surely have been his school-task he was preparing with such interest ; for he remained quite unaffected by all the tumult around him. The gang of little ones who were indulging in

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these shouts and gambols on the bed were all children of Harish.

Bipin, edged near to Siddheswari, leaned over her face and murmured : "Tonight it is my turn to sleep on your right, isn't it, mother?"

Before she could reply, Kanai gave voice from his lower end of the bed : "No, Bipin, not you. I shall sleep on her right."

"But," protested Bipin, "it was only last night you slept there."

"Did I?" retorted Kanai unabashed. "All right, then I will sleep on the left."

But here Patal's little pate, smothered so long under the quilt, came bobbing up into evidence. Until now he had lain low, clinging for all he was worth to this very place on the left side of his aunt. So great was his dread of being dispossessed of it that he had not joined even in so inviting and delightful a tumult as that going on all the time around him. But now he raised his thin voice :

"But I have been lying here quietly all this while."

"Patal!" fulminated Kanai, strong with an elder brother's prerogative. "Don't bandy words with your elder, or, I'll tell mother."

Desperate, poor Patal flung his hands around the neck of his aunt and raised a whimpered plaint :

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"But, Mother, I have been lying here for such a long time!"

"Patal!" thundered Kanai, stern of eye, to browbeat the contumaciousness of the little brother—but he stopped dead.

For just then Sailaja's voice rang out from one side of the corridor: "Merciful heavens! surely, surely dacoits have broken into sister's room!"

What an instantaneous transformation of scene! At the remote end of the bed Haricharan in the twinkling of an eye thrust his "reading-book" under the pillow and opening another very unreadable volume stared steadfastly into it, his whole soul's concentration focussed through his glowing eyes. Kanai left unsolved the problem of the two sides—right *versus* left—and started declaiming: "The vast girdle of waters that surrounds this globe of ours——"

But it was at the storm-centre that the most incredible miracle had happened—the whole troupe of boisterous children had been spirited away as if by magic and not a vestige of them was left anywhere. When Saila, just returned from her aunt's, stepped in with a cup of milk for Siddheswari, the room was a scene of flawless hush broken only by the geographer's "Deep rumble of the ocean!" On the other rim of the bed Haricharan was so plunged in his studies that he would have hardly taken notice even if an

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elephant had chosen to stampede over his shoulders. He had been reading about the exploits of romantic heroes in an exciting novel of Bankimchandra, but they, alas, had melted into air at the disconcerting materialisation of Sailaja. He was wondering whether his lightning legerdemain had really escaped her quick eye, and so long as he could not be certain of that his heart went pounding away dismally against his ribs. Saila fixed her gaze on Kanai.

"Look here, you vast-girdler, tell me what were the waters doing before I came?"

"It wasn't me, Mother," squeaked Kanai in a high famine-stricken voice. "It was Bipin and Patal who were making all that row."

For these two had been his antagonists in the judicial combat of left *versus* right and it was without the slightest compunction that he made over the two innocents to the dread custody of Saila.

"But where are they? Why, there is not a trace of them anywhere!" exclaimed Saila. "Through what magic chinks have they evaporated, I wonder!"

Kanai jumped up in immense enthusiasm and pointed an outstretched finger at the bed: "They haven't evaporated, mother,—there they are—all present! under the quilt, over there."

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Saila burst into laughter at the expression on his face and his significant gesture : for, from a distance it was this informer's own high-pitched voice that had most aggressively assailed her ear. She turned to Siddheswari and said : "Mind, sister, they'll finish you in no time if you go on indulging them in this way. If you can't bring yourself to lift your hand to them, you could give them a scolding at least ?" And without waiting for Siddheswari's rejoinder she addressed the invisible ones :

"Now, all you children, out of the room ! Come with me this instant."

Siddheswari had been looking on in silence, but now she said softly though not without a touch of temper :

"What is this nonsense about their finishing me—the children are merely playing a little. And why must they leave the room with you ? Let them be. No, no, you shan't beat them before my eyes—I won't have it. Be off from the room yourself before they get suffocated under the quilt."

"Sister," said Saila with a slight smile, "am I really beating them all the time ?"

"Much too often, Saila," returned Siddheswari. "Don't I see their faces turn dark with anxiety at the sight of you ? Why are you standing sentry

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there ? Move off and let the poor things come out into the light of day. Go."

"I will go," rejoined Saila, "but with them. You will never get better if you allow them to hang about you and badger you day and night. Patal is the quietest of all : he alone shall sleep with you ; from now on the others must sleep with me." She passed this solemn decree like a judge from the bench and gave her sister-in-law a stout look : "Now get up and drink your milk. But wait a moment." She suddenly faced round on Haricharan :

"Hari, you gave your mother her medicine, I suppose, duly, at six-thirty ?"

All suspicion of colour left Haricharan's face. He had been busy scouring hills and dales with his heroes, ubiquitously, "saving the country" in noble company. How could there be any room in his thoughts for such an insignificant affair as a mere medicine ? Not a word could he succeed in getting out of his throat.

"I won't take any more medicine," broke out Siddheswari in an angry voice.

"I was not speaking to *you*, sister ; please, hold your tongue," retorted Saila. She came very close to where Haricharan had been lying and said :

"It is you I am questioning : did you give her the medicine or did you not ?"

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Haricharan had started up and sat cowering even before she crossed the threshold ; but now he felt as if it was the end of time.

"M——mother doesn't want to take it," he stammered.

"That is not the point," scowled Saila. "Answer my question : did you give it or did you not ?"

Alarmed, Siddheswari sat up and made haste to rescue her son from the implacable pressure.

"But why are you making so much fuss at this hour of the night ?" she said to Saila. Then turning to Haricharan, "here, Hari, hand me the medicine or whatever it may be and let us be done with it."

Haricharan, taking heart a little, got down in haste on the safe side of the bed ; he took up a phial and small glass from a neighbouring desk and came and stood by his mother. But no sooner had he started to uncork the phial than Saila was again at him from her place : "Yes, that is all, isn't it——just to pour the medicine in the glass ? No need of water to mix it with, no cardamom for the mouth to take away the taste ? You wait : you will see how I drive this perfunctory way of doing things out of you."

Once he had the phial safely in his hand, Haricharan had begun to feel a little confident that, for the day at least, the peril had been tided over. But the raising of this cardamom question

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laid waste all his hopes. For a while he looked helplessly here and there and then pleaded in a piteous tone : " But it isn't anywhere, auntie."

" Does it come on wings ?" was the retort, " or has one to go and get it ?"

" How is he to get things and give them when he hasn't the faintest idea of such matters ?" intervened Siddheswari tartly. " As if it were work for *men*. You are good only to rule the boys with an iron hand, Saila ! Why didn't you leave word with Nila to do this work ? The heartless girl ! Since your return she hasn't even crossed my threshold once. Why should she ? Much she cares whether her mother lives !"

" But she wasn't here, sister," said Saila. " She went with me to my aunt's."

" Why did she go at all ?" said Siddheswari captiously. " And you, how could you take her away there when I am so ill ?—No, Hari, not a step ! I will swallow that frightful medicine just as it is. Give it here." So contriving to put the whole blame on her absent daughter, Siddheswari stretched out her hand for the hated concoction.

" Just one moment, Hari," interposed Saila.

" I'll go and fetch what is needed. I won't be a minute."

And she hurried out of the room.

III

NAYANTARA, Harish's wife, had lived in the mofussil in the midst of the so-called elite of modern Bengal, and was quite steeped in Anglicised ways of living. She would not let her sons stir out except in full European costume. Siddheswari had just sat down to her morning rites, her daughter Nilambari squatted before her with all the paraphernalia of her mother's medicines, when Nayantara entered the room.

"Sister," she said, "the tailor has just delivered Atul's coat. Twenty rupees to pay."

"Twenty rupees for a coat!" exclaimed Siddheswari, forgetting altogether rite and prayer.

"Oh, it is not too much, sister," replied Nayantara with the flicker of a superior smile. "A single suit for my Atul has sometimes cost us sixty and over."

Siddheswari started—she had never heard of such a thing as a "suit."

Nayantara entered into explanations: "Coat, pants, tie, collar—that's what we call a 'suit'."

Siddheswari, troubled and mortified, turned to her daughter: "Nila, call your auntie; let her get out the money and pay it."

"Why not give me the key of the safe?" suggested Nayantara. "I will take out the money."

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But Nila had already stood up to go.

"How can mother give it to you?" she said.
"Don't you know the key of the iron-chest has always been in auntie's keeping?"

With that she left the room.

Nayantara's face went purple :

"So it was only because Saila was away that you could have the keeping of the keys for a while, sister?" she railed.

Siddheswari had resumed her devotions and gave no answer.

IV

A FEW minutes later When Sailaja came in to give the money, an absorbing discussion was in process over Atul's coat. He had put it on and was holding forth on its cut parading all the details of its beauty under the fascinated gaze of his mother and Haricharan, both eagerly drinking in from him his deep knowledge of sartorial fashions.

"Look, Auntie," said Atul to Saila, "tell me, *you*, what you think of it?"

"Very nice," she said curtly, and counted into his hand twenty rupees from the safe.

"Your wardrobe is full," said Nayantara, her

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words ostensibly addressed to her son, but really meant for the hearing of the others, "yet, you can't do without more and always more."

"How often am I to tell, mother," came the impatient answer, "that this is the very latest fashion? I must have at least one of this cut, or the others will laugh in my face!" He pocketed the money and was about to leave the room, but he suddenly stopped and blurted out: "I feel disgraced even to look at Haricharan's outfit. Just see, crumpled here, sagging there—quite grotesque!" He laughed and added with appropriate pantomime: "He goes about just like a bolster lurching along—like this."

At her son's vivid mimicry Nayantara burst into rapturous giggles and Nila turned away to repress her laughter.

Haricharan gave Saila a piteous look and hung his head in shame.

Siddheswari was supposed to be performing her rites—but she saw her son's look and was pained to see it.

"It is indeed a shame," she observed with some heat to Saila. "Why must they be starved of their pleasures and hobbies, Saila? Let the children all have coats made for them."

Atul waved his hand with a gesture of high patronage and turned to Siddheswari. "Let me have the money," he said. "I will give the order

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to the tailor and have everything made in right good style. I am an expert, nobody can cheat me."

Nayantara was about to add her word in testimony to her son's great skill and cleverness but, before she could get it in, Saila spoke out in a firm deep tone :

"There is no need to give yourself airs, child. Keep your own oil for your own spinning-wheel. Your cousins have others to see to the making of their coats."

She sailed out of the room flinging over her back with a jingle the bunch of keys tied to her garment's end.

"Did you hear Saila, sister?" cried Nayantara in anger. "Why, what was wrong in Atul's words, I should like to know?"

There was no answer from Siddheswari. Perhaps she was too rapt in the devout repetition of the name of her Deity and had not heard! But Saila had. She came back a couple of steps and looked Nayantara in the face.

"Sister has heard many things from Saila, you may be sure," she said. "It is only you who have not or you would not have giggled when Atul mimicked his senior. If he had been my son and done that, I would have buried him alive." So she said and went off quietly to attend to her own duties.

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All in the room remained struck into a dead silence. After a little Nayantara heaved a deep sigh and addressed her elder sister-in-law :

"Sister," she said, "to-day is my Atul's birthday—and this is the day Saila has chosen to throw at him every abuse she could imagine."

At this presage of a storm between the two sisters-in-law Siddheswari in alarm began to repeat silently the name of her Deity with a yet increased fervour.

In the absence of any reply Nayantara spoke once more :

"If you are not going to do anything about it, it is we who shall have to seek for some remedy, whatever it may be."

Still no word came from Siddheswari.

Nayantara beckoned to her son and they both went out slowly.

V

WHEN, a few minutes later, Siddheswari rose from her devotions Nayantara came and stood before her. She had not gone but was only waiting behind the door.

"What is it, Nayan?" asked Siddheswari in trepidation.

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"I must know where I stand, sister. I do not live as a parasite on others that I must need submit silently to insult and browbeating."

Siddheswari replied apologetically, labouring to pacify her :

"But there was no browbeating meant ; that is her way of speaking. Besides it was not against you she said anything. She only—"

"She only wanted to bury Atul alive and accused me of giggling. Don't try to cover up things, sister, it is too transparent. What worse browbeating could there be ? Or perhaps, if she had caught hold of me and actually beaten me, then and then only, you would have been satisfied ?"

Siddheswari was stupefied—then, softly, she said :

"What are you insinuating, Nayan ? Do you think it was I who put her up to it ?"

"That you know best," was the vehement retort—for ever since the episode of the key, Nayantara had been smouldering secretly within herself.

"What do you mean ?" asked Siddheswari in mixed alarm and perplexity.

"Nobody can look into the mind of another, sister," Nayantara flashed back. "One has to judge from what the eye sees and the ear hears. But we are newcomers in your family-circle. If you feel that our presence is an infliction and a

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calamity, you could tell us that yourself. Why egg on a third person against us?"

To this unexpected indictment Siddheswari's tongue could not summon up any reply—she could only stare in dazed bewilderment.

Nayantara went on in a still harsher tone :

"We are not blind bats, sister, we can see through it all very well. But instead of chasing us out in this way you could have got rid of us with some soft words—it would have looked better and we, too, could have gone without any loss of self-respect. Won't he fall from the sky when he hears of it?" (*he was her husband*) "He who goes about catching hold of everyone and telling him : 'My sister-in-law is not a human being—she is a goddess'!"

Siddheswari burst into tears.

"My worst enemy could not make a charge like this against me, Nayan," she said in a choked voice. "It is better that I should be dead than have such things reported about me to Harish. I was so happy that you had come!—Bring me my Kanai and Patal and I will swear with my hands on their heads—"

Her sentence was cut short in the middle by the entrance of Saila into the room with a cup of milk.

"Prayers finished, sister? Now drink a little milk."

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Siddheswari forgot her weeping and screamed out to Saila :

“Get out of my sight—out, out with you this moment !”

Saila taken aback stood staring at her.

“Why must you come and say to people whatever jumps first to your tongue ?” answered Siddheswari through her tears.

“But what have I said and to whom ?”

Siddheswari paid no heed to the question but went on in the same high pitch of voice :

“Because you have the habit of taking liberties with me, your audacity has grown beyond all limits. Who is going to put up with the sharp edge of your tongue ? Do you think everybody is your sister ? Leave my presence—at once.”

“Well, well, drink your milk,” replied Saila in her most quiet and natural voice, “I am going, but I need this cup.”

Her unruffled demeanour set Siddheswari in a flare.

“I won’t ! I won’t drink anything ! go ! go ! Either you go out of this house or I go. One of us two leaves—till then I won’t touch food.”

“I came back only the other day, sister, I can’t go away so soon,” replied Saila in the same quiet tone. “Better you go and stay a few days at Katwa for a change. Ganges is quite near and it will be very convenient for your last hours :

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you can get into it ever so easily." Then facing round on Nayantara : "Well, Nayan, what is all this noise early in the morning over a trifling matter? Isn't sister half-dead already with continued fever? Why do you aim your shafts at her? If I have done anything wrong, you could tell it to me. What is it?"

Siddheswari wiped her eyes and said :

"It is Atul's birthday. How could you say such ugly things to the child as you did to-day?"

"Oh, it is nothing worse than that?" said Saila, breaking into laughter. "You need not be afraid, Nayan. I too am a mother, like you, and to me Atul is just the same as Haricharan, Kanai or Patal. A mother's scolding is no abuse, you may be sure. But I will call him and give him my blessing. Now, sister, drink off your milk. I have left the frying pan on the oven."

A smile broke out on Siddheswari's face in the midst of her tears.

"Well and good," she replied, "but you must ask Nayan's pardon. You have spoken harshly to her too."

"Very good, I agree," said Saila and she stopped and touched the feet of Nayantara. "If I have done wrong, Nayan, forgive me, I apologise."

Nayantara stretched out her hand and touched her chin with her forefingers which Saila kissed.*

*In Bengal ladies often bless their juniors in this way when they make their *pranam* (obesiance to elders).

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But Nayantara's face was sullen, and she kept silence.

A heavy burden was lifted off Siddheswari's heart. She melted into love and joy and touched Saila's chin as Nayantara had done.

"Never think of taking offence at any word of this mad-cap, Nayan," she said. "Just look at me—how I rail at her and scold her every moment, and yet if I remain without seeing her for an hour, I feel something hurting me deep down in my heart. But surely you don't want me to drink so much milk! I can't, little sister."

"Oh yes, you can! Drink," insisted Saila.

Without making any further difficulties Siddheswari drained all off with an effort.

"Now call our child," she said, "and bless him."

"I shall do it this very instant," replied Saila with a laugh and went out with her empty cup.

VI

NEVER in his life had Atul suffered a humiliation like this. He had been reared from his infancy with every indulgence and tender care: his parents had never at any time breathed a word against his desires and fancies. Today's disgrace, so great an insult administered publicly before

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all, set him tingling and burning as with a fire running through all his body. When he came out, he flung his brand-new coat on the floor and sat with a face sullen as an owl's.

This time Haricharan's sympathy was all for Atul, for was it not in pleading his cause that his cousin had received this snub? So he too came and sat beside him with a heavy down-cast face. He longed to console him, but could find no words and only remained close by him in silence.

But Atul felt that it would not do to take this matter lying down. For it was not under the insult only that he smarted; he had come home from the mofussil, bearer of a multitude of fashions and chic coats and pants and ties, and in that strength had erected for himself a seat of proud eminence high above the others; but now he saw this lofty structure, under the single shock of his own aunt's rebuff, tumbling into shattered pieces, brought down in one ruinous mass! Little wonder that he was troubled and restive.

"Much I mind what anybody says!" he burst out in wrath—for Haricharan's ears. "They don't know me—this is Atul Chander in person, who, once he is provoked, cares nothing for all the aunts in creation—no, not a button."

"Neither do I," echoed Haricharan, but in much alarm, and, after throwing an apprehensive glance on every side, "Hush, there is Kanai

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coming!" And he got up in a fidget of fear lest the foolhardy Atul should air his valour before the newcomer.

Kanai stood outside the door and shouted a high-voiced summons as if he were the body-guard of the Great Mogul himself:

"Hari, Atul! Mother is calling you—quick, quick!"

Haricharan turned pale: "Me? What have I done? It can't possibly be me.—Go, Atul, it's *you* Aunt Saila is calling."

Kanai raised a voice of authority: "She is calling you both—both, go, go at once. Why, Atul! who has thrown your new coat on the floor?"

For sole reply Atul gazed at Hari and Hari gazed back at Atul: no one stirred or spoke. Kanai rescued the downfallen new coat from the floor, placed it on the arm of a chair and took his departure.

"I have nothing to fear," said Haricharan in a voice hoarse with apprehension. "I did not say anything—it was you who said you didn't care a button for Auntie."

"It was not I only—you too said it," retorted Atul and stalked haughtily into the house. He looked dangerous, with the air of one ready to proclaim the truth and the whole truth if need be. Haricharan's countenance looked more fallen

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still. For one thing, the cause of his aunt's summons to him was a mystery; for another, one never knew what that reckless Atul might not blurt out. His first thought was to follow him and face the thing and to deny *in toto* any and every indictment that could be framed against him. But in the last resort he could not summon up the least confidence that he would be equal to this bold procedure.

Besides, the time for presence in court was disconcertingly near: Kanai had delivered the summons, he would soon be back with the warrant.

So finding no other means of self-preservation, he clutched at his bathing towel and made for the banks of the Adi Ganga.

For the whole household lived in dread of Sailaja fearing her wrath more than that of any tigress.

VII

ATUL went in and learned on enquiry that Aunt Saila was in the vegetarian kitchen. His breast puffing out in defiance, he came and stood at the threshold of the kitchen door. For, unlike the other children of the house, he had not yet had occasion to know this Aunt of his. He had

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no idea that a woman too could be as hard as steel. Rather, because he had been made much of all along by the common type of soft-hearted and yielding relatives of both sexes, he had got into his head this curious idea about mothers and aunts and all other elders that the only way with them was to give a strong reply to their very face and that would bend them to his purpose. All that was needed was to proclaim one's will with force enough, then everybody would acquiesce—but not otherwise: the boy who stopped short of that, he held, was doomed to constant disappointment and discomfiture. Since his arrival the defects of Haricharan's apparel had strongly drawn his attention and he had been giving him secret lessons in this kind of strategy. Yet only a moment ago in his own case no strategy had availed him; under the rebuke of Sailaja, far from his making any sharp retort, no reply at all could reach his lips and he had to come away without even a protesting murmur. So now he had come set upon paying back that humiliation to the last farthing of his debt and stood near the door of the kitchen ready to dare everything. From where he stood a part only of Sailaja's face was clearly visible. If she had just raised her head a little, she could have seen Atul. But she was immersed in her cooking and did not hear his steps nor lift up her face.

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But only to-day for the first time Atul observed her closely. It was only for a moment, but that was enough. It came home to him at once that this face was not like his mother's nor his other aunt's. If there were any one in the world who had the strength to assert firmly his will to this face, he felt at once that that hero was certainly not he. His inflated chest contracted and he stood there mute. There was no courage in him to draw her attention by a sound or a movement.

Just then Nila happened to pass that way on some errand. Atul's feet suddenly caught her eye and she stopped aghast and began to make alarmed and anxious signs to him under cover that this was no place for anybody to stand with shoes on.

Atul threw a quick glance at his Aunt's bent face and through his heart ran a thrill of fear. His first impulse was to slink away unnoticed ; his next was to pull off his shoes and throw them down in the courtyard. But he felt ashamed to betray timidity before a younger cousin. He had truly been ignorant of this prohibition till now : he had not disobeyed it deliberately or in defiance. But, pampered without restraint or measure by his parents, the boy's pride and self-love had become so intense and keen that it was like death to him to recoil in fear from some-

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thing he had once done. So he stood there, pale and frightened, facing certain ruin, but, like the proud Duryodhan, incapable of ceding an inch of ground to the adversary.

Sailaja lifted her face.

"You have come, Atul?" she said with her soft and tender smile. "Just a moment, child—but what's this? Your shoes on! Down, quick, to the courtyard—down."

If any other of the children of the house in a similar plight had got off so lightly from Sailaja's hands, he would have taken to him wings, right thankful for his escape; but Atul, his head bent, remained standing where he was.

Sailaja rose.

"You cannot come here with shoes on, Atul," she said. "Go down."

Atul answered—his face dry and in a faint voice: "But I am standing off the threshold, what harm is there in it?"

"There is harm," Sailaja rebuked him. "Go down."

Still Atul did not budge. He saw in his mind's eye Haricharan, Kanai and Bipin exultant under cover, gloating over his deep disgrace. So he curved his neck like a bad-tempered mule and went on:

"At Allahabad we used to go inside the kitchen even with shoes on. If one stands outside the

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threshold, there is no harm."

Sailaja stood speechless with amazement at the boy's impudence ; but her eyes were beginning to give out glints of fire.

Just at this moment Manindra, Haricharan's eldest brother, came out perspiring from his morning exercise with club and dumb-bells ; he was about to pass, but chanced to look at Sailaja's eyes and asked in wonder :

"What's the matter, Auntie ?"

Saila was too much in wrath to be capable of any speech, but Nila who was standing there pointed out Atul's feet :

"Atul is there with his shoes on and he won't budge."

"You there !" shouted Manindra, "Will you go down at once ?"

"What harm is there if I stand here ?" persisted Atul doggedly. "It is only because that woman detests me—that she is telling me to go—go—go."

At one bound Manindra sprang up beside him and with one mighty slap on Atul's cheek thundered : "How dare you call Aunt Saila 'that woman' ? Where did you learn to speak like that of your elders—insolent brute ?"

Atul had collapsed in a sitting posture on the floor, a veil of darkness before his eyes. Manindra was an athlete and he had not measured the weight of that gigantic slap.

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Manindra felt very much out of countenance. He had never meant, had not thought it at all needful to hit with so much force. He leaned anxiously forward, took Atul by the two arms and put him on his feet. But no sooner was Atul up than he leaped on Manindra like a furious leopard, scratching, biting, calling him such names, expressive of a doubtful birth and relationship, as brothers and cousins would not dream of applying to each other in any Hindu family. Manindra was at first stupefied with astonishment. He was a senior student of the Medical College and much older than his juvenile cousins and brothers, who would scarcely dare when addressing this big brother to look him full in the face. That had been his experience all along in this house, nor could he even have imagined a well-bred person mouthing such vile and unutterable terms of abuse. He lost all sense of proportion and restraint ; seizing Atul by the neck, he flung him down and with kick upon kick pushed him from above into the courtyard. All the children, Kanai, Bipin, Patal and others raised a shrill outcry, Siddheswari, Manindra's mother, left her midday rites and came running. Nayantara had started to take some refreshment and was just stuffing a couple of *sandeshes** into her mouth, —at the noise she came out and turned blue with

*A kind of sweets prepared from casein.

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horror. She spat her *sandesh* out of her mouth, raised a funereal wail, bounded and threw herself on her son over whom she huddled on all fours. All this in its sum total made a tumult of such magnitude that even the masculine heads of the household left their work and came rushing to the scene. Craning her neck from the kitchen Saila said: "Moni, you may go out now." Manindra went off without a word. His father Girish, also abashed at the crazy hysterics of his sister-in-law, made his exit.

When the tempest had somewhat subsided Harish questioned his son. Atul, blubbling through his tears, put the whole blame on Sailaja.

"It was she," he averred, "who put Moni up to beat me."

"Sailaja," shouted Harish, "Will you let us know why you instigated Moni to such a murderous assault?"

Nila from inside the kitchen made herself the mouthpiece of her aunt:

"Because Atul was disobedient and called Monida bad names."

"Then I also must say, Saila," said Nayantara championing her son, "that it was because you all but got him killed that he called names—in sheer fear of his life. Otherwise my Atul is not the boy to do any such thing."

"Of course not," corroborated Harish and

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inquired in a still more heated tone : “ Nila, will you ask your aunt who is she to command Atul to be thrashed ? If he didn’t obey, why was not a complaint made to us ? When we were on the spot, why did she take on herself the authority to punish ? ”

To these three seriated questions Nila made no answer. Till now Siddheswari had been sitting like one drained of all energy in a remote corner of the veranda. The strain of the excitement had been too much for her worn-out frame. In the house she did not care as a rule to interfere in anything except the children’s upbringing ; for at heart she was convinced that the Creator had not been at all fair in His arrangements with this household. On the one hand He had made her the *mater-familias* and yet never thought of endowing her with the requisite intelligence and perspicacity ; on the other, he had made Saila the youngest of all in age and the youngest brother’s wife and yet equipped her with brains in an overflowing measure. For keeping accounts, for writing letters, for knowing what to say to people, for care and watch over the sick and the bereaved, for ruling everybody, cooking, sewing, decorating, arranging things—she was peerless. Siddheswari often used to say that her Saila, if she had been born a man, would have become a Chief Justice by this time. When

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Harish started to castigate this idol of hers, the delinquent Creator, I imagine, suddenly pushed into her head some modicum of a sense of responsibility—the responsibility of the head of the household.

“Very good, Harish,” she broke in sharply, “but if that is so, why do you yourself take authority into your hands, instead of making a complaint to us? Our old mother is still alive, so am I—if the ladies of the house have to be corrected, it is for us to see to it. You—a man—her husband’s elder brother!—What is all this? Go out. What will people say if they hear of it?”

“If you kept an eye on everything, sister, there would be nothing to worry about,” replied Harish, somewhat disconcerted. “For, then, would one person in the house dare to massacre another?”

He was turning to go out, when his wife stopped him and said: “Well, then, wait here a little and just see how she corrects the ladies under her!”

But Harish went away without an answer.

VIII

A WEEK or so later, from early morning the belongings of Harish and Nayantara were undergoing the long process of being sorted out and packed. Siddheswari, observing it, came and stood outside their door watching in silence for about a minute before she enquired: "What is all this, Nayan?"

"You can see very well," was Nayantara's melancholy reply.

"That I can, of course. But where are you moving to?"

"Anywhere," came the reply in the same sorrowful key.

"Still, where? You won't tell me?"

"How am I to know? He has gone out to choose a house. I can't tell you the address till he comes back."

"Has your brother-in-law heard of it?"

"What's the use of telling him? The one person in this house who has to be told everything has heard of it, you may be sure. She has even come and had a peep without showing herself."

This was a lie of Nayantara's. Sailaja, of a morning, could hardly ever find leisure to breathe—she knew nothing at all about it.

For a moment Siddheswari kept silence. "It is a pity, Nayan," she said, "that you have not

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been able to appreciate the worth of your elder brother-in-law. But if you ask any outsider, he will tell you that such a relative can be had only as a reward for the austerities of many lives—not at any smaller price.”

“Do you think we don’t know that, sister?” burst out Nayantara in a sudden flame. “And not only such a brother-in-law either; for how often have we not repeated to each other day and night, he and I, that a sister-in-law like you falls to one’s lot only after many lives of piety and virtue. In *your* house we could live sweeping the rooms as your servants. But not here! Here we can’t stay even an hour longer.”

Siddheswari felt such a ring of sincerity in Nayantara’s voice that she was moved. “But, Nayan, it is as much your house, as it is mine,” she said. “You mustn’t go anywhere else—I won’t allow it.”

Nayantara shook her head and replied in a pathetic tone :

“If God so wills, ever, sister, we will come back and live near you; but, pray, don’t ask us to stop here even a day longer. My Atul has become the eyesore of everybody in this house. Let us have your consent to take him quietly away with us.”

“How can you speak like this, Nayan!” said Siddheswari, very much hurt and moved. “Is it right to cherish ill-feeling because just one day

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there chanced to be some trouble ? Atul is our child as much as yours and—.”

Nayantara had not the patience to wait till the sentence was finished : “ It is just because I can’t cherish ill-feelings, sister,” she burst out “ that I have to pay dearly—always. It is true, I weep and howl at times—but the next moment I am quiet and clear of it all as before—like Ganges water—not a word, not a trace left in my mind. I do forget everything but—you must not get angry with me, sister,—this Saila of yours is not a straight or easy type. She has tutored everybody in this house and since then no one is speaking with Atul. I saw the poor boy going about crest-fallen with a morose face and I asked him, so I learnt of it. Sister, we can’t stay here. If my child goes about moping like this in the house, cold-shouldered by the others, he will fall sick. Rather than that, it is better if we take him somewhere else. She too will feel relieved, and I will breathe freely.”

Two big tears of sorrow for her child rolled down Nayantara’s cheeks and melted Siddheswari. A child’s grief was something her heart could not bear. She wiped away Nayantara’s tears and sat awhile in silence. She could never have imagined that such a severe punishment could be inflicted on any one in the household and by such an easy quiet device.

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"Poor little child!" she sighed. "Then, does no one in the house speak with Atul?"

Nayantara too heaved a sigh: "Ask anybody," she said, "and you will find it out for yourself."

Siddheswari sent for Haricharan and interrogated him. Haricharan answered with energy:

"Who is going to speak with such a low-minded fellow, one who calls his elder brother any names he likes, and abuses Aunt Saila?"

Siddheswari could find no reply at the moment.

"What has once been done can't be undone, Hari," she said after a while. "Now go and call him and speak with him."

Haricharan shook his head and replied:

"He need not go far to find company fit for him. There is a stable in the quarters and grooms and coachmen in it. Let him go there and he will find plenty of friends and comrades."

Nayantara flared up.

"You have a tongue impudent enough to compete with any, Hari," she said. "You dare to say such things to us? Very well, that is best; we will go and make friends with the grooms and coachmen. Come, sister, let the servants pack up our things."

Haricharan looked towards his mother: "Let Atul pull his own ears and rub his nose in the dust in sign of submission and repentance before all," he said. "Then we can speak with

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him. Otherwise Aunt Saila—O no, Mother, we can't and won't—not one of us." He waited for no further argument, but left the room and was gone.

Siddheswari remained sitting where she was in deep depression.

Nayantara put in her soft-voiced suggestion :

"But if Saila called them all and asked them to make it up, the difficulty would be over at once, would it not?"

Siddheswari replied with a slow nod of her head : "It would."

"You see, sister!" said Nayantara. "Will these children, when they grow up, obey you, or have any love for you? Who can be sure of the future?—Your own flesh and blood are being drawn away from you and turned into strangers. But say what you will of *my* children, they have hearts that are devoted to their mother. If I say anything to them, catch them defying me with a shrug, showing such an insolent spirit and walking off like that! These excesses bode no good, sister!"

Siddheswari probably had not caught the drift of all this.

"It is quite true," she answered guilelessly. "Everybody in this house is under Saila's thumb --from Moni to Patal downwards. Whatever she says or does is the law for all. Nobody heeds

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me in the least."

"Is that as it should be?"

Siddheswari raised her face and asked: "What?—Nila, little mother! just call your auntie here for a moment."

Nila was passing that way on some errand; She turned back; Nayantara said no more Siddheswari waited—wistfully.

Sailaja had hardly entered the room when Siddheswari hastened to appeal to her: "All their things are packed—must they go then, Saila?"

Sailaja knew nothing of what was happening. It was with some alarm that she answered:

"Go? why?"

"What else is left for them to do?" answered Siddheswari. "What a heart of stone you have inside you, Saila! By your order no one plays with Atul; no one speaks with him even,—how is the poor child to pass his days, I should like to know? And how can a father and mother see the face of their child grow small and sad day and night and yet go on living here? So then, you don't want them to be here, in this house, is that it?"

Nayantara administered a timely pin-prick:

"If we went away, it would be quite the best thing for *her* from every point of view."

Sailaja paid not the slightest heed to the innuendo.

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"I can't allow any child of the house to associate with a boy like that, sister," she said. "I don't even find words to tell you how low he has sunk."

Nayantara could restrain herself no longer.

"Ill-omened creature !" she hissed lifting her head like an angry serpent. "You dare vilify like this a son to his mother's face ? Get out of my room,—this instant, and may your flesh fall from your face like a leper's ; get out of my room."

"I never stepped into your room of my own will. But it is just in this way that you have spoiled and ruined your child—irredeemably."

With that Sailaja left the room, very tranquilly.

Siddheswari remained sitting for a long time in great trouble and perplexity, not knowing what to do or say next.

"Cast away all affection for us from your heart, sister," cried Nayantara, bursting into sudden sobs, "and let us go away from you. You are trying all ways to show your preference for us, sister, because they (Harish and Girish) are brothers born of the same mother. But Saila has no intention at all of allowing us to stay here, you may be sure."

Siddheswari made no reply to this. "Why can't Atul do what they ask ?" she suggested. "He too has not behaved properly, Nayan, you must admit that."

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“Do I say that he did well, sister? Do people in their senses abuse their elders?—All right, here I do atonement for him at the feet of you all.”

And with that Nayantara chafed her nose vehemently against the floor; after which she lifted her face and said: “Now do forgive him, sister,—all of you. My heart breaks when I look at his face.”

She seemed just about to bend down again, probably to repeat the nose-rubbing performance, when Siddheswari stretched her hand out and caught and held her. Then she wiped the tears from her own eyes.

IX

AT mid-day Siddheswari sat to speak in the kitchen with Saila, but when after a deal of talk and a great profusion of arguments she failed to win her over, she ended by losing her temper.

“Why not speak out the truth frankly, Saila,” she said, “that you *want* to drive them out of the house?”

The only reply that Saila made was to lift her

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eyes and look once at Siddheswari. That look threw Siddheswari into a greater ire.

"You think, do you, that I will drive his (Girish's) own brother out of the house and live with you, so that people may throw mud at us? If you can't fit yourself into my family circle you and yours may go wherever it suits you. I can't stand any more of this. You are neither more to us nor closer than they."

Siddheswari rose. She had probably hoped that this time at least Saila would soften down. But when she saw that Saila returned no reply to anything she said, but went on in wordless silence with her ladling and her cooking, she rose and left the spot in a truly towering rage.

A little later, when Girish was seated for his mid-day meal and she was fanning him as usual, Siddheswari, filled full with her sorrow and mortification, brought up the subject.

"It seems Nayan and Harish can't manage to stay on in this house," she said. "Their things are being packed since the morning."

Girish lifted his face and asked: "Why?"

"What else could happen?" rejoined Siddheswari. "Already, as it is, Nayan and Saila are at loggerheads all the time; and now, with all that, Saila has tutored everybody so that no one speaks with Atul. The poor child has thinned to half his size in these last few days."

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Just then Sailaja came with a bowl of milk and stopped at the door ; she adjusted her clothes neatly round her, stepped in, put the bowl near Girish's dish and went out.

" You see, Saila—" resumed Siddheswari, meaning her words to reach Saila's ears, for she noticed that on hearing her own name spoken Sailaja moved aside where she could not be seen and stood there listening. Now, whatever the delinquency of the other party, Siddheswari's maternal heart had melted at the sufferings of Atul and his mother. If some kind of compromise could have been arranged, that would have been for her the greatest relief. But when she found Saila stubbornly inflexible to all pressure, her whole body burned with anger : so to-day she had girt up her loins to inflict due chastisement on her.

" You see, Saila has begun to create ill-feeling between brother and brother," she went on. " At this rate, when they grow up they will be all the time quarrelling and battling with each other. Is that a good thing ?"

" Very bad," murmured the Head of the family and helped himself to a mouthful of rice.

" It was at her instance that Moni thrashed Atul so badly," she continued. " Well, one got a beating, the other got some abuse, the account is settled—why start all afresh ? Why forbid the

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children to speak with Atul ? Call Moni and Hari to-day and tell them they must speak with Atul. Otherwise, if they go away from our house, we shall have our faces blackened by the neighbours. When all is said, you truly can't cast off your own brother and his wife for the sake of a cousin's wife."

"Of course not," acquiesced Girish serenely and went on with his meal.

"Is your cousin (Saila's husband) never going to make any effort to earn something ? Does he mean to pass his whole life like this ?"

As soon as the subject of her husband was raised Saila put her hands to her ears and left in a hurry ; she did not wait to know what reply Girish would make. She would never listen to such discussions : she did not wish to hear. For she always dreaded a discussion about her husband, feeling that it could hardly be anything other than unpleasant to her. Yet she had been a lover of truth all her life, and she had never flinched from either telling it or hearing it, however painful it might be. How it came about that in her husband's case alone she had turned against the trend of her own nature, it would be difficult to discover.

X

HOWEVER great might have been the wrath with which Siddheswari started her complaint to her husband, still when she saw Sailaja beat a hurried retreat it came home to her that she had gone much too far. For she well knew that Saila's sorrow and mortification knew no bounds if her husband's failings were brought up against her.

At his wife's sudden lapse into silence the Head of the family lifted his face and looked at her.

"I will administer a sound scolding, you will see—don't worry," he said and in the interval between the termination of his meals and his betel-chewing, clean forgot the whole affair.

Girish was indeed of a strangely eccentric nature. Nothing could ever find a lodgement in his mind except courts and cases. He never took any interest in the happenings of his own household, who came, who went, what was being spent, what the children were doing—nothing: he just went on earning money, assented to everything good or bad and when he had expressed out of hand an opinion of some sort or another, felt he had discharged his whole duty.

Consequently, when the Head of the household, having done all his duty as the Head by his promise to administer a scolding, went off outside,

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Siddheswari passed no remark at all ; she did not think it necessary even to enquire who it was he intended to scold and for what.

Nayantara, deliberately eavesdropping in the next room, had overheard everything and gone away in high glee over the observations of Girish and Siddheswari. But with the lapse of a few minutes she was back.

"Why are you still sitting there like that, sister?" she asked. "It is already very late. Come, you must take something."

"How can it be so late?" said Siddheswari, abstracted and pensive. "It is hardly even eleven."

"Well, isn't that late enough in all conscience? Why, in this bad state of health you ought to finish your meals before it strikes nine."

At such a moment talk about food and meals had no savour for Siddheswari.

"No matter, Nayan," she said, "I never eat early. It isn't time yet for me."

But Nayantara would not give up so easily ; she came close and took her by the hands.

"That is just why your body has sickened and become the shadow of what it was," she said putting an anxious note of solicitude into her voice. "If I had the rule of the kitchen, do you think I would ever let your morning-meals be served later than nine? If you don't live, sister,

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who else will feel themselves any the worse off for it ? It is only we who would lose our all. Now, come, I must see to it that you have something to eat—otherwise I shall have no peace.”

Nayantara had been here over a month already. Why, in spite of her daily absence of peace over her sister-in-law's condition, she had never once made the least endeavour to recapture that lost tranquillity Siddheswari understood well enough. But nevertheless, so great is the power of adulation, she could not, in spite of her clear vision, help being moved.

“It is because you are so near and kin to me that you speak like that, Nayan,” she said. “Who else is there whom I can truly call my own ?” Nayantara took Siddheswari by the hand and led her into the kitchen. With her own hands she prepared a place and a seat on the floor neat and spruce, made her sister-in-law squat upon it and, all this done, got the rice served by the cook and herself placed it before her.

It was Saila who did the cooking for the vegetarians ; so Nayantara called to Nila : “Ask your auntie to bring whatever is ready in the other kitchen.”

After a minute or so Saila came in, put the vegetables and other food near Siddheswari's dish and was going out in silence when the latter turned to Nayantara.

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“Nayan, why don't you sit down to your meal along with me ?” She piped in her thin voice of a sick woman.

“We are not at death's door like you, sister,” returned Nayantara. “Finish your meal first, I will eat only then—on your very plate.” Then with a side-glance at Saila and a lift in her voice : “No, dear sister, I give you fair warning that, so long as I am alive, I won't let you give us the slip and pass away from our midst.” She paused, calculated the distance between herself and Saila and added : “Are we not two sisters just as truly as they (Girish and Harish) are two brothers ? Wherever I may be, sister, however far from you—you may be sure that no one else will weep for you with the same pull of the heart as I shall. What others will do from self-interest, I shall do from deep within. Don't forget ever what you said to me just now—that you have nobody you can truly call your own except me.”

“Is it a thing to be forgotten, Nayan ?” said Siddheswari in a voice overflowing with emotion. “Because I could not recognise your true worth for so long, God is punishing me now.”

“May He keep all His punishments for me alone, sister,” rejoined Nayantara, wiping away her tears. “The whole blame is mine—it was I who failed to know you truly.” Then after a brief pause she added : “I have learned only to-day

our unfitness to touch the dust of your feet, but how can we show our feeling to you now by our acts? God refuses me the privilege to be near you and serve you—for we have become an eyesore to Saila.”

“Then let her take her children and go and live in her village home,” cried Siddheswari vehemently. “Must I feed and pamper her whole brood—for my own calamity and disgrace? A cousin, his wife, their children—isn’t that all the relation between us? I have fed them, I have clothed them—enough of it! If she is ready to remain in my household like a servant—without a murmur—she can stay. If not, let her go to her place.”

Siddheswari had not the remotest suspicion that Saila was standing close by, holding on to the neighbouring door-frame. But suddenly the wide red border of a sari flashed on her eyes like a ribbon of flame and she craned her neck and saw her standing there stock-still, silently following everything that had passed in their dialogue. Instantly she lost all appetite for her food and felt as if she would like to annihilate Nayantara and her dear new intimacy and run away—anywhere, so as to be out of this predicament, saved and free.

“What is the matter, sister?” questioned Nayantara in a perplexed and anxious voice.

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"You are just toying with your rice—you are not eating?"

"No," answered Siddheswari in a choked voice.

"Do eat a little, sister," importuned Nayanara, "for my sake."

"Why do you waste your breath for nothing, Nayan?" Siddheswari flashed back before the other had finished. "I won't eat. Get away from my presence."

She shoved her plate aside suddenly, rose and went away.

Nayanara remained staring at her, agape like a wooden doll; not a word came out of her lips. She was not, however, one of the kind who suffer their perplexities to harm their self-interest. She followed Siddheswari to where she was washing her mouth, caught hold of her hand and said humbly: "If I have unwittingly said anything improper, sister, I ask your pardon. If with your sick body you persist in starving yourself, I swear I shall knock my head on the floor at your feet and die here and now."

Siddheswari had felt, indeed, inwardly very much ashamed of herself: she went back, ate dumbly what she could, and then retired.

But, shut in her room, she became exceedingly depressed and wondered how she could have had the heart to inflict so much pain on Saila! Nor had she an iota of doubt in her own mind that

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Saila would now start her dire inevitable fasts by way of punishing her. After that when she learned upon enquiry from Nila that Saila had sat down to eat, it might be somewhat difficult to testify to her heights of delight, but it was certain that the abyss of her astonishment was fathomless. How on earth Saila, transgressing the long established rule of her whole nature, could suddenly become so forgiving and pacific, was a mystery she was unable for the life of her to plumb or even penetrate.

XI

GIRISH and Harish returned from the court in the evening and sat down together to light refreshments. Siddheswari was sitting not far-off with a sorrowful, pale face ; to-night she was feeling utterly dispirited in mind and body.

Her face caught Girish's eye and he recalled the affair of the morning : not that he remembered *all* about it, but he did recollect that he had to scold Ramesh anyhow.

"Call Ramesh, Nila," he commanded—for Nila was there standing at the door.

"Why him of all persons ?" asked Siddheswari in alarm.

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“Why ? Must give him a thorough scolding. He has been sitting here idle till he has become a mere animal.”

“An idle brain,” commented Harish in English, “is the devil’s own workshop.” Then, with a glance in the direction of Siddheswari : “No, no, sister, no more indulgence ; he is no longer a child, remember.”

Siddheswari made no reply ; she remained sitting there in angry silence.

Ramesh happened to be at home just then,—he entered the room quietly in answer to his eldest brother’s summons and stood waiting.

“Why did you quarrel with Atul ?” broke out Girish at once, looking him full in the face.

“Quarrelled ? I ?” cried Ramesh in amazement.

“Of course, you did,” insisted Girish in an angry voice : then, indicating his wife by a glance : “It was she who told me you punished him viciously. Do you mean to say she has lied to me ?”

Ramesh stared in stupefaction at Siddheswari’s face.

“Have you turned imbecile ?” vociferated Siddheswari. “When did I tell you that Ramesh had punished Atul ?”

“No, no, it wasn’t he,” Harish rectified, “it was Saila.”

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"But why should even Saila abuse Atul?" pursued Girish.

"And why should you think that she has abused him either? She hasn't!" retorted Siddheswari with an equal vehemence. "And if she had, I would have taken her to task for it. Why are you bringing it up against poor Ramesh?"

"Well, well, even if it is so," said Girish, "still you, you wretched fellow, are such a good-for-nothing that in your straw-broking you threw away my good four thousand rupees in a lump. While just go and look at the Khans of North Calcutta—how they have made crores and crores as straw-brokers."

"Straw-brokers!" broke in Harish, startled.

"Jute-brokers,—excuse me," demurred Ramesh.

"They are *my* clients," Girish asseverated angrily. "You think I don't know about them and you do? I insist, they have grown immensely rich as *straw-brokers*. Every year they despatch ship-loads after ship-loads of straw to England."

Both Harish and Ramesh kept silence. Girish looked at their faces in turn.

"All right, let us say jute then," he conceded. "But can't you bring in even a few hundreds as a jute-broker? I can't go on feeding you for ever while you sit doing nothing. 'The floor on which you fall helps you to rise again.' You have lost four thousand once? What does it matter? Dare

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again—lay out another four thousand. If that goes, invest as much again. But you mustn't expect me to work myself to death while you feed fat, doing nothing."

Harish, secretly much perturbed, ventured to put in a word very mildly.

"Whatever work one does has to be learned first. You can't be a successful jute-broker by just jumping into the trade. It is not right to let so much good money be wasted again and again."

Girish acquiesced at once: "Of course it isn't. We will have nothing to do with jute-broking: from to-morrow you must just start again straw-broking. The first thing to-morrow morning I will draw a cheque for eight thousand rupees. Four thousand you will invest in straw, four thousand you will keep as reserve. When you have lost the first four thousand, you can draw on the reserve—but not before. Follow me? I simply won't go on feeding you any longer for doing nothing. You may go."

Ramesh left in silence. As soon as he was gone, Harish commented with much shaking of his head: "All that sum,—eight thousand rupees,—is gone in air—you can take that as certain. What do you say about it, sister?"

Siddheswari made no answer.

Receiving no encouragement from that quarter Harish turned to his brother and said: "Are you

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truly going to give him all this money ?”

“What do you mean by ‘truly’ ?” questioned Girish in surprise.

“Only the other day he threw four thousand away,” said Harish. “Now you are going to let him waste another eight thousand. It is unthinkable to me.”

“What do you advise me to do then ?” asked Girish.

“What does Ramesh know about business ?” said Harish. “You may give him eight thousand or eight lakhs, he won’t bring back even eight pies of it—I can bet you that. And just think how long it takes to earn and lay by so big a sum of money !”

“Right, right !” assented Girish at once. “To give him money is as good as throwing it into water. Quite right ! A good-for-nothing wastrel.”

“Rather than that,” went on Harish, much encouraged, “let him get some employment somewhere. One should take up what one is fit for. For instance, we have to pay twenty-four rupees every month for a tutor to teach the children ; that is a work that he can very well do and it will be so much money he can contribute to the household expenses and so be of some use to the family. What do you say to it, sister ?”

But before Siddheswari could reply, Girish cried in great satisfaction : “Right, you are right

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again, Harish. It is like Rama binding the sea with the help of the squirrels." Then, glancing at his wife : " You see ? Harish has hit upon the true solution. I have always found him like that from his very childhood—full of a most keen practical intelligence and acumen. No one has thought and foresight for the future like him. A little more, and I would have thrown all that money away ! Let Ramesh begin teaching the children right away from to-morrow ; no need to waste his time any more over his newspapers."

" Do you mean that you won't give him the money ?" asked Siddheswari.

" Of course not. How can you ask such a thing ! Catch me giving him money again !"

" Then why did you at all say that you would ?"

" Because one has said something, sister," put in Harish, " it doesn't follow that one must act up to it. I too am his brother and my opinion should count and must be taken. If the family money is wasted, I too feel the pinch !"

" There comes out your real motive, Harish," retorted Siddheswari, and rose and went away in anger.

XII

NAYANTARA had come forward and taken upon herself the office, assumed the whole responsibility of tending and looking after Siddheswari. The tending was serried and complete, a dense and solid wall of care with no gap or chink in it through which anybody else might come near her. Never in all these years had Siddheswari received from anybody such care and nursing as this. What then was her restless soul hungering for at every moment and why was it, at every moment, as if on the look out for some pretext for clash and quarrel? That was an enigma whose key was only in the possession of One within who knows all that passes in the human heart . . .

That morning Siddheswari came swaying and tottering like an invalid of many months and flopped down on the floor of the kitchen-veranda. She sighed and addressed, it would seem, the wall in front of her in a feeble and tired voice, "Nayan is indeed one who is kin and close. Without her I feel I would have to die here as if I were in a wilderness. Even if my own sister were with me, she could not have taken more care or tended me better."

Saila was cooking inside and heard everything.

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For the last few days she had not gone once into Siddheswari's room nor had she spoken a single word to her. Now too she kept silence.

"All this feeding and clothing of outsiders," resumed Siddheswari, "is like pouring butter on ashes—a penance for one's sins. It brings no help when one falls on evil days. But look at this Nayan of mine! Before I drop a word she comes running helter-skelter to get things done. If I have to walk, it is painful to her. It is my ill-luck that made me keep such a one at arm's length till now—thanks to the back-biting of others."

The tinkling of Saila's bangles, the sound of ladle and frying-pan, could be clearly heard where Siddheswari was sitting; so when, although so near, there did not come from her any kind of reply, even to such a monstrously false accusation, Siddheswari lost patience altogether. Her thin piping voice became at once strong and vibrant.

"A letter has arrived from my mother," she cried out, "and there is nobody anywhere to read it out to me. For what purpose do I feed and clothe outsiders in my house, I should like to know?"

Nilā was there helping her aunt with cooking. "Why," she answered from where she was sitting, "Aunt Nayanāra has read out that letter to you

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two or three times already ! When did any other letter come, Mother ?”

“Don’t play the grown-up and put in your word everywhere, Nila,” Siddheswari rebuked her. “As if reading the letter were all ! Is there no reply to be given to it ? Or is your aunt Saila dead that I must go and call people from the other side of the town to write one for me ?”

“Is there nobody else who can write a letter for you, Mother,” retorted Nila angrily, “that you must talk about auntie’s dying and on this *sankranti* day.”*

Siddheswari had quite forgotten that it was *sankranti* today. She turned pale in a moment and answered : “You are truly impossible, Nila !” She repeated a couple of auspicious words to countermand and cancel her ill-omened utterance, then added : “When did I ever breathe a word about her dying ? My own child dares to brow-beat me, and one whom I got married only yesterday and brought up with my own hands shuns my very shadow ! I am so sick and in such suffering ; yet death won’t come to my relief. If I take another drop of medicine from today, then I swear——”

Her voice choked with sobs. Wiping with her

* *Sankranti*—the last day of every month; specially devoted, in orthodox Hindu families, to pieties and blessing and auspicious religious festivities. A curse or an unfortunate word (e. g. about death) is looked upon as particularly ominous on such a day.

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sari's hem the tears from her eyes she went to her own room and collapsed as if lifeless on her bed.

Nayantara had closely followed everything from behind a window in the adjacent veranda. She now crept very quietly into Siddheswari's room and sat at her feet.

"Why do you go and wheedle her, sister, for such a small thing as writing a letter?" she murmured. "You have only to command me once and I could write for you ten such letters here and now."

Siddheswari said not a word,—she turned on her side and lay with her face to the wall.

Nayantara was silent awhile, then she ventured: "Do you want the letter to be written at once, sister?"

"You are very tiresome, Nayan," Siddheswari burst out suddenly with a harshness in her voice: "I keep telling you to let it be—for you can't do it—and yet you go on."

Nayantara would not take offence. She never gave vent to her wrath or mortification when she had some personal interest that could be served by others. She got up and went away in silence.

XIII

ABOUT two o'clock in the afternoon Siddheswari called Nila and asked very confidentially : " Has Saila taken her food ? "

" Why not ? " said Nila, much surprised. " She has taken it just as she does every day ! "

" Hm, " said Siddheswari and fell back into silence.

It has been said already that Saila had always been exceedingly sensitive : for the very smallest of reasons she would enter on a fast which put Siddheswari to no end of suffering and trepidation ; for she had to lavish caresses, soft words and all kinds of blandishments before she could win her back to cheerfulnees and serenity. Yet here was that very Saila betraying not the slightest sign of wrath even after this constant nagging at her parasitism ! It was a mystery that Siddheswari could not resolve. The more such a line of conduct stood out as something strange and unnatural, the more she turned sick at heart with fear. She would feel ever so much relieved if somehow all could be brought to a head in open quarrel,—but Saila kept miles away from any such *denouement*. From morning till night she went on with her daily routine of work. No one could put a finger on anything in her conduct that might be deemed ominous : only she who

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with all the affection of her heart had reached up the ten-year old bride into the woman she was today, could not but feel, with dismay in her heart, what a dense cloud of cruel indifference was daily massing itself round Saila, rendering her more and more nebulous, sealed, inscrutable.

"Mother," said Nila, "may I go now?"

"And where do you want to go?" frowned the mother. The daughter remained standing in silence.

Siddheswari sat up in wrath and cried out in a higher key: "And how is it that you are so thick with this auntie of yours that you can't sit by me even for a minute? Sit down, you little traitor—remain here and don't speak or stir. You shan't go anywhere." She threw herself back on her bed and lay with her face turned away from her daughter.

Nayantara stepped in opportunely, and said in a tone of affectionate reproach to Nila: "Fie, little mother. You are now grown-up and will be married before long and will have to go away to your father-in-law's. The few days that are left to you, spend in the service of your parents. You should sit by your mother, stand waiting upon her, learn some good things in her company. Is it right to spend the day with anybody and everybody? Go, sit by her side a little and massage her feet till she falls asleep. She has kept awake

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longer than is good for her in her bad state of health."

Nila had never been well-disposed towards Nayantara. Tossing her head she replied, with undisguised heat: "What do you mean by suggesting that I spend the day with anybody and everybody? With whom do I spend it? You are speaking of aunt Saila—aren't you?"

Nayantara was astonished and nettled to see her face so flushed with anger.

"I mentioned no names, Nila," she said, "I simply repeat that when your mother is ill, you should be nursing and taking care of her."

"Taking care of me, indeed!" said Siddheswari without even turning her face in that direction. "Rather, if I were to die, they would feel happily relieved."

"Well, she is perhaps still a child and has no sense or intelligence," said Nayantara, "but Saila surely is not a child. It is for her to say to Nila: 'Go and sit by your mother for a while.' But she neither comes herself nor lets the girl come."

Nila was on the point of giving a sharp retort, but she suppressed the impulse and stood silent with a sullen face.

Siddheswari turned round towards them.

"I tell you truly, Nayan," she said, "I don't want even to look at Saila's face any more. The very sight of her face becomes poison to my eyes."

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“Don’t say such things, sister,” said Nayantara, “with all her faults, she is the youngest of us all; and you should remember that if you get offended with her, she would have no place of refuge left anywhere. By the way, he (Harish) came by five hundred rupees this month. He has kept a few odd rupees and given me the rest for you. Here it is, sister.” Nayantara untied a knot in the skirt of her sari and handed over a bundle of currency notes.

Siddheswari with a melancholy face stretched out her hand and took the money.

“Nila,” she said, “go and call your auntie. Let her keep this in the iron-chest.”

Nayantara’s face turned inky black. All the brightly coloured pictures she had lined in her imagination over the gift of this money, were daubed now into one amorphous blotch. Not only had Siddheswari’s face showed not a ripple of joy, but on top of that it was Saila who was sent for to take charge of the money! It was she who still had the keeping of the key of the money-chest!

There was a little bit of history hidden behind this money-giving affair: Harish had had no wish to give it. It was Nayantara who, planning a complex move in her family game, had got this sum out of her husband after much prodding and persuading. But now, with this impassive recep-

tion by Siddheswari, so much money was as good as thrown into a puddle—to no purpose. In her disappointment and rage she felt like breaking her own head to pieces with her own hands.

Saila came up. It was after full six days that she now addressed Siddheswari.

“Did you call me, sister?” she asked in a perfectly natural voice, looking her full in the face.

This question of but a couple of words from Saila’s lips penetrated Siddheswari’s ears with a thrill of inexhaustible sweetness. In the twinkling of an eye she huddled up hastily on her bed.

“I did indeed call you, little sister,” she said, her heart melting with tenderness. “A big sum is lying about, so I said to Nila: ‘Just go, little mother, and call your auntie to put it safe under lock and key.’ Here take it,” and she put the notes on Saila’s outstretched right palm. She felt no inclination to tell Saila today as to whence and how they had come to her.

Saila opened the safe with the key tied to the hem of her Sari and began to deposit the money with a quiet leisureliness in her movements. As she looked on, Nayantara found this more and more unbearable, but still somehow she mastered her inner restiveness and said with a perfunctory smile: “That is why your brother-in-law (Harish) said to me, sister: ‘He is not a mere cousin but my own elder brother born of the same mother.

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To whom else am I to look for maintenance if not to him? But all the same, if I can help him by contributing even five or six hundred rupees a month, it will be of some service.' What do you say, sister?"

Siddheswari's smiling face grew sombre. She made no reply, but fixed her eyes upon Saila. Nayantara went on, unable, perhaps, to grasp the significance of this sudden gravity.

"Sri Ramchandra bridged the sea with the help of a squirrel. So he (Harish) says every now and then: 'Our self-less sister does not ask anything of anybody, but is that a reason why *we* should be inconsiderate? Everyone ought to work and help according to his power. But if, instead of helping, all of us go on spunging on her, each with our whole brood only eating, drinking, and sleeping, well, how can things go on in the end?' You too have to provide for your Hari and Moni. You can't fritter away all you have on us. Tell me, sister, is it not true, what I say?"

Siddheswari muttered, but with a heavy displeased face: "Yes, of course it is."

Saila locked the safe, came in front of Siddheswari, drew the key from her ring, threw it on her bed and was about to pass out in silence. Siddheswari's wrath caught fire, but she restrained herself and asked sharply, though with outward calm:

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"What does this mean, Saila?"

Saila faced round on her.

"I have been thinking for some days past, sister," she said, "that it is not right to keep the key with me any more. Want warps human nature and I have wants on all sides. At any moment I may be tempted to a slip. What do you say, Nayan?"

"I have no concern with your affairs, Saila," returned Nayanara, "Why do you bring me in for nothing!"

"And why has there been no slip all these days till now, may I know?" asked Siddheswari.

"Because a thing has not happened till now it does not mean that it won't happen in future. Even as it is, we are doing nothing but only living upon you. We cannot help with money, we cannot serve you in kind. But is it right to go on in this way for ever?"

Siddheswari's face went red with suppressed rage.

"Since when did you become so virtuous, may I ask?" she said. "Where was this considerate conscience of yours hidden all this time?"

"Why make yourself ill by flying into a temper, sister?" said Saila in a tranquil unaffected voice. "You don't find any pleasure in our being with you, neither do I myself find it agreeable any longer."

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Siddheswari was too angry to articulate a word.

"Sister may not find it too agreeable, I admit," intervened Nayantara putting herself forward as her proxy. "But why should *you* find it so very disagreeable, Saila?"

Saila was passing out without deigning to reply, when Siddheswari cried out to her :

"Tell me before you go, you evil thing, when do you mean to rid us of your presence, when? I will celebrate that day by a joy-offering of sweets. You have set fire to my happy domestic life and laid it waste with your accursed strife and quarrels. What Nayan says is not without cause! So much pride and effrontery are not possible without some secret strength of money behind it. Give me an account first how much of my cash you have stolen, then you can go."

Saila turned round and stood looking at her. In her eyes and face for a moment there was fire as of a conflagration, but the next moment she had turned away and was gone in silence.

Siddheswari fell like a broken branch wallowing and weeping on her bed.

"I have brought her up since she was so small, Nayan," she sobbed. "And now she goes away insulting me like this! Let them (Girish and Harish) be back first! If I don't bury her alive in my own courtyard, my name is not Siddheswari."

XIV

SIDDHESWARI had a fatal defect in her nature : there was no backbone to her confidence in anyone. Her firm faith of today could become loose and shaky tomorrow and a quite trifling reason was enough for such an entire reversal. She had always put an absolute trust in Saila, but after a few days of persuasions from Nayantara in the opposite direction she began quickly to doubt Saila : yes, it must be true, Saila must have a deal of money in hand and it was not difficult to guess the source from which so much affluence came.

At the same time she knew that Saila would never dare to rent in the town itself a separate house and live there with her husband and children.

At night the Head of the family was sitting in his outer room, his spectacles on his nose, his mind fathoms deep in the documents of the urgent cases which he was studying under the gas-light, when Siddheswari entered and plunged abruptly into the whole affair.

"Can you tell me what is the use of all this work you are doing?" she cried. "You mean then to sweat day and night to that end—just to feed a styful of pigs?"

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Girish probably had caught only the allusion to feeding.

"No," he replied without raising his head. "I have nearly done. Just this little to finish and then I can go for food."

"Who is talking to you about food?" said Siddheswari, impatiently. "I have come to tell you that Saila and Ramesh are at last moving out from the house with their affairs all very nicely arranged. You did so much for them, but now it seems, it was all for nothing—have you heard the news?"

"Hm," assented Girish only half-recovered from his abstraction. "Of course I have. Yes, you must tell Saila to arrange her affairs very nicely. Who is to go with them?—Tell Moni—"

There his pronouncement remained unfinished—lost in the thick of his briefs.

"Do you mean never to pay attention to even a single word of mine?" exploded Siddheswari in high wrath. "I am asking one thing, you are answering quite another! Are you aware that Saila and Ramesh with their children are going away from the house?"

"Going? Where?" asked Girish, startled into his senses by the vehemence of her rebuke.

"How am I to know where?" retorted Siddheswari in the same strident key.

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"Well, why don't you take down the address?" suggested Girish.

Half-mad with chagrin and mortification, Siddheswari smote her forehead with her hand and cried :

"Ill-starred that I am! Now I am to go and take down their address! Had it not been for my evil fate, would I have been delivered into such hands as yours? Why didn't my parents rather throw me tied hand and foot into the water of the Ganges?"

She burst into tears. The belated discovery after three and thirty years of this catastrophe, that her parents had mated her to a useless husband, seemed to overwhelm her mind with a bottomless sorrow and repining.

"If to-day you were to close your eyes for ever," she blubbered, "I could manage to live somehow by doing a maid-servant's work in somebody's house—I know, that is what I shall have to do one day! But my Moni and Hari! What refuge will be left to them?" All her pent-up weeping, released, descended in torrents, opening the flood-gates of her eyes!

This time briefs and documents and urgent cases were swept out from Girish's head: perturbed by his wife's sudden and passionate weeping, he called out in a deep angry voice "Hari!"

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Hari was reading in the next room and came running in alarm.

Girish thundered at him a fierce reprimand. "If you ever quarrel again, I shall break a horse-whip on your back, rascal! So you have said good-bye to your studies, have you? Only quarrel and play, play and quarrel all day and night! Where is Moni?"

His children had never known what it was to be scolded by their father.

"I don't know," stammered Hari, his brain paralysed by fear.

"You don't? You think I don't get wind of your rascalities? Know that I keep my eye open in all directions. Who teaches you?"

"Our school-teacher, Dhiren Babu," replied Hari in an indistinct mumble.

"Call him," said Girish, "at once—not a word, go."

"How can I?" Hari faltered. "He—he comes to teach only in the morning."

"Why in the morning only?" questioned Girish. "Why not at night too, may I know? I don't want a tutor like that. From to-morrow I will engage another. Well—but go and attend to your studies now—at once, scoundrel!"

Hari with a wan dried-up face gave one last look at his mother and walked slowly away.

"Do you see what kind of teachers we are

getting now-a-days ?" said Girish looking at his wife. "Good only at grabbing their pay and shirking their duty ! Tell Ramesh to dismiss this Paran Babu the first thing to-morrow and engage another tutor. He thought he could hoodwink me with impunity !"

Siddheswari said not a word. She just flung one sharp wrathful glance at her husband and went away in silence.

Girish, on his side, convinced that he had accomplished all his duty to the very highest pitch of perfection, plunged gladly back again without further delay into his own world of legal documents.

XV

SIDDHESWARI certainly was not innocent of the knowledge that money was a very necessary factor in life. Only, till now her mind had not been focussed in that direction. Covetousness is a contagious disease, and the poison of it began slowly permeating her body and mind through the contaminating touch of Nayantara.

The rumour was in the air that Saila would bid adieu to the house that very day after the meal. In Siddheswari's heart a weeping, long and loud,

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was struggling frantically to burst through and find its outlet. But somehow she overmastered it and was lying limp on her bed under the pretext of fever when Nayantara came and sat beside her, put her palm on her body, felt the temperature, expressed alarm and asked whether it would not be best to send for a doctor.

"No," said Siddheswari laconically, and turned her face to the other side. Nayantara divined the cause of her peevishness and made haste to administer her own patent medicine.

"I was wondering, sister," she said slowly after a brief pause, "how people manage to have such a mass of money in hand. Our neighbours Jadu Babu, Gopal Babu, Haren Sarcar and others do not make even half of what your husband earns, and yet not one of them has less than a lakh in his account at the bank. Their wives too have not less than ten or twenty thousand each at their disposal."

"How do you know, Nayan?" questioned Siddheswari, beginning to be a little interested.

"He (Harish) asked the Sahibs of the Banks," replied Nayantara. "You see they are all his friends. Yesterday Gopal Babu's wife expressed her disbelief in my words to my face. 'How can a thing like that be true, Nayan?' she said to me. 'Your sister has no money in her hands? Why, she must have at the very least'—"

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Siddheswari forgot all about her fever ; she sat up and flung her bunch of keys with a loud clang to Nayantara.

"Open with your own hands every box and coffer, Nayan, and see for yourself," she cried. "I defy you to come across a single hidden pice over and above the money for current household expenses. Saila was all in all. I had not even the slightest voice in anything. I have fallen into the hands of such a husband, Nayan, that even the sight of money is strange to me. But he is now served right. They are going away appropriating all we had, and he can do nothing against it. If I had had the keeping of the money, would it not have remained in the house instead of taking to itself wings like this ? Tell me that, Nayan."

"That goes without saying, sister," nodded Nayantara.

Siddheswari's heart was once more hardened against Saila. She completely forgot that it was she herself who had brought her up, entrusted her with the key to the safe and made her all in all in the household, choosing to efface herself and become a nonentity.

"One sole earning member and all the burden of this huge household on his shoulders !" she said. "How can I blame him either, Nayan, tell me ?"

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"Every body can see that, sister," acquiesced Nayantara.

Then after a short silence she began softly : "Nanda Mitter was a clerk, a famous man in our village. He brought up his youngest brother, educated him, married off his children, and for all this he spent up to his very last farthing. If his wife ever complained he would silence her with a sharp rebuke—"

"Just the same plight as mine," put in Siddheswari.

"Exactly," echoed Nayantara. "How this Nanda Mitter used to rebuke his wife and say : 'Why do you worry ? Our Naren will be there. Just as I have brought him up and made him an advocate, so he too will support us in our old age. Look on him as if he were not your brother-in-law but your son.' But such is this age of iron, sister, that when this very Nanda Mitter lost his employment—thanks to a cataract in his eyes—well, this Naren Vakil, his own brother, lent him money and realised it with compound interest by auctioning his brother's share of the paternal house and acquiring it himself. Now Nanda Mitter actually begs in the streets and cries out with tears that if he has come to this plight it is because he would not heed his wife's warnings. And yet these were not cousins—they were brothers born of the same mother."

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Siddheswari shuddered, "What is this you are telling me, Nayan?"

"Not a word of it is false, sister," replied Nayantara. "The whole village knows the story."

After that Siddheswari said nothing more. Up till now she had been thinking more than once that she would call Saila and tell her she must not go, at other times turning over in her mind plans for thwarting the departure. But the story of Nanda Mitter's ruin threw her mind into a hopeless disorder: not a vestige remained in it of any least desire to stop Saila.

XVI

JUST when Girish was on the point of rising to get ready for the court, Ramesh came to him and said: "I think I shall go and live in our village home."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, if no one lives there the house will go to rack and ruin," said Ramesh, "and then there are the ponds and fields and lands that will deteriorate. Besides, I have no work that I can do here. That is what makes me think of it."

"Good, very good," cried Girish, and with great

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satisfaction gave his assent. The good soul had not the faintest idea of the gulfs of family estrangement and misunderstanding that were hidden behind the few colourless words of his cousin's proposal.

No sooner had he left for the court than Saila made her obeisance of farewell to Siddheswari from the threshold of the room and left the house holding her two children by the hand. Nothing but a small trunk went with her.

Siddheswari lay on her bed like a log of wood and Nayantara opened the window of her room on the second storey and watched their going.

XVII

SIDDHESWARI'S bedstead was made up of two enormous cots joined together. Even in such a huge bed she had to pass her nights with difficulty, cramped for want of room. But while she would give free vent to the loss of temper caused by these discomforts, she would yet never suffer a single one of the children to be away from her even for a night. All night she had to sleep warily and get up any number of times; never once had she the opportunity to enjoy a healthy undisturbed sleep. Still she would not

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concede the right to Saila or anybody else to rescue her from all this care and worry. Even during her severe and protracted illness none of the children had any place to sleep in except her bed. Kanai's way of sleeping was difficult : so he must have so much space. Khudi often committed a delinquency in the bed : for him there was prescribed an oil-cloth. Bipin in his sleep wheeled round in circles : for him there was another special arrangement. Patal had the habit of getting hungry at half-past-two in the morning : some provision for that emergency had to be kept near his head. She had also to see whether Kanai's leg was oppressing Khudi's chest or Patal's nose crushed under Bipin's knees—her night passed away in providing against these mishaps and scolding the transgressors. At the time of Saila's departure it had not come home to her that such a big space in the bed would be found empty to-day when she went there to sleep. After some millions of abjurations and importunities from Nayantara she had gone down at night to eat and was returning upstairs when Saila's room caught her eye. It was as though a club had hit her on the breast. All was unlighted ; the two doors gaped open-mouthed at her. She turned her face and hurried into her room. There she glanced at the bed : Bipin and Khudi were sleeping there occupying but a fraction of

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the ample bed—the rest of the bed glared at her vacant and hungry like a hot and sandy desert. She shut her eyes and lay down dumbly in her own accustomed and narrow space, but streams of burning tears flowed down the corners of her closed eyes and drenched the pillow.

She had always been over-meticulous and insistent about the feeding of the children of the household. In this matter she refused to repose the least reliance on anybody other than her own self. It was her fixed idea that if she were not there in person to see to it, they would resort to all sorts of ruses to underfeed themselves and these tricks could be detected by no one but herself. If by any accident she missed seeing with her own eyes to the feeding of any one of the children, she would put him under a serried cross-examination, feel his stomach, subject him to a multitude of ordeals to demonstrate that he could not possibly have eaten a good fair meal. To atone for this wrong-doing the unfortunate child had to drink then and there under her eyes a full bowl of milk. Saila would sometimes put up a fight on behalf of the children and argue against the mischief of forced feeding: but beyond thoroughly exasperating Siddheswari her intervention bore no result. Whenever Siddheswari looked at any of the children she immediately perceived that he was getting too thin, and this was

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a calamity that filled her with an immeasurable alarm and disquiet. To-night as she lay on her bed, it came to her again and again that amidst the endless disorders of the village-home Kanai surely had not eaten his full and Patal must have gone to sleep unfed ; perhaps no one would wake him up to feed him and he would be tossing about in agonies of hunger all night. The more clearly her imagination visualised all these evils, the more her heart was rent with anger and pain and sorrow.

XVIII

GIRISH was sleeping happily and soundly in the next room. When the night was far advanced, Siddheswari could bear it no longer ; she went to her husband's bedside, put her hand on his body and broke his sleep to put this question : " Well, even if I grant that Saila had the right to take Patal away, what about Kanai who is not her own child ? What claim has she upon him ? "

" None whatever," replied Girish out of the heaviness of sleep.

Siddheswari took heart of hope and sat down on the rim of the bed.

" In that case " she said, " if we prosecute her,

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can she be punished ? Tell me truthfully, can she or can she not ?”

“Of course she will be punished !” came the drowsy but categorical answer.

Siddheswari got quite excited with joy and hope ; she started once more her questions :

“All right about that,” she said, “but now take Patal. You know it was I who brought him up. Suppose we persuade the Judge that Patal cannot do without me and may even fall seriously ill through pining for me, wouldn’t he pass a decree that the child must live with his eldest aunt ?—There now ! You have started snoring once more ! Didn’t you hear what I said ?” And she gave a violent push to her husband’s feet.

Girish woke up with a start and said : “Of course not.”

“Why not ?” protested Siddheswari in wrath. “There is surely no order of the Queen Empress that a mother, because she is the mother, can kill her child ? Suppose we ask Harish the first thing to-morrow to serve on them a letter of attorney, what will happen ?”

Siddheswari sat waiting for the reply for a moment, but as it came only in the shape of another deep snore from her husband’s nose, she rose and went off in a rage.

All night she had no sleep. All the time she was only thinking when would the day break,

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when could she have a letter of attorney sent through Harish to claim back the children, and how they would be at once full of sorrow and remorse on the receipt of the letter and hasten to restore Kanai and Patal to her—such high hopes and happy aerial constructions kept her wide-awake throughout the night.

The first streak of dawn found her knocking at Harish's door and calling :

“Are you up, Harish, are you up?”

Harish opened the door in haste and was much astonished to see her there.

“There is no time to be lost,” said Siddheswari, “you must write a letter of attorney at once and have it served by our porter on Ramesh and Saila. You must put it in the strongest words possible, threatening that if they don't answer in twenty-four hours, they will be prosecuted.”

Harish needed no urging to take that road : he consented at once.

“Let me know what it is all about, sister,” he said, lowering his voice. “Sit down, sit down ! Now, what have they taken away with them ? We must make out a big claim, you understand ?”

Siddheswari sat down on the bed, and with dilated eyes expounded her demands.

The face of Harish lost its light of joy and turned black with disappointment when he had listened to her recital.

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"Have you turned crazy, sister?" he exclaimed. "I thought it would be something else, something serious. It is their own children they have taken away with them, what can you do for that?"

Siddheswari could not believe him.

"But," she insisted, "your brother himself told me they would be punished if we made a complaint against them?"

"He couldn't possibly have told you any such thing," retorted Harish. "He must have been joking with you."

"Do you mean to say, Harish," rejoined Siddheswari, "that even at my age I can't catch a joke? It isn't that. In your heart you don't want to see the children restored to me. Why don't you say that frankly?"

Harish, put out of countenance, tried in all sorts of ways to make her understand that the Court could not possibly grant such a claim and that the better course would be to raise a claim of some other kind so as to pay them out for what they had done. "And that is what we ought now to do," he wound up.

Siddheswari rose from her place, indignant. "Keep your 'oughts' to yourself, Harish," she said; "My life is three parts gone, a short span only remains to me and I can't start now concocting false claims. If I did, you would not answer for me in the life beyond—not you. Well," she

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added, "If you won't draft the letter I want, I shall send Mōni to Nagen Babu and get it done."

With this she left the room.

XIX

THE next morning Siddheswari had got into an altercation over some item in the bazaar-account with the general manager, Ganesh Chakravarty. The poor man was labouring to persuade her, in all sorts of ways, that by spending two rupees on the top of twelve times four the full expense came to fifty. The *mater-familias* was but a novice in these affairs, and of late she had acquired the firm conviction that all were out to cheat her out of her money, taking unscrupulous advantage of her lack of intelligence. She had not the slightest doubt that Ganesh too had stolen from her.

"Fifty rupees is a lot of money, Ganesh," she argued; "Do you think, just because I am uneducated, you can persuade me that because two rupees have been paid over and above twelve fours the whole fifty are spent and gone and nothing is left? Do you think I am so stupid as to believe that?"

"Well, Mother," said Ganesh, much upset and

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feeling quite helpless. "Call Nila then and ask her."

"I must call Nila to understand a simple account? What can she understand that I don't? No, Ganesh, this is not correct conduct at all. I warn you, you can't give me any account you like, merely because Saila is no longer here. That she should go and leave me exposed to such trouble! It was I who brought her here—the little traitor—a small bride of ten, and reared her on my breast into the woman she is, and now she shows her spirit—she stalks off taking two children of the house with her. All right! But I am keeping myself well-informed of all that happens. The day I hear that Kanai or Patal is even slightly ill, I defy her to keep the children then. Well, you may go now, but try to remember what you spent and come in the afternoon and tell me how you got rid of so much money."

The poor man went off on that, completely at his wit's end as to what to do.

"I didn't want to speak, sister," said Nayantara, "but I too have managed a household and kept accounts and money. Now that Saila is not here, it is hardly proper that I should look on doing nothing while you bear the whole brunt of the trouble. Nobody can take me in with false accounts, you may be sure."

"You are right, Nayan," said Siddheswari.

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“How can I stand these bothers and complications with this health of mine? When Saila was here, to keep the account of the money, to spend, to send to the bank, all was her work. How can all that be done by me? From now on you must see to everything.”

So that was settled, but she took good care, all the same, to tie the key of the safe to the hem of her own sari.

The days rolled on, but though Nayantara invented a thousand and one ruses, not one of them availed to get the key of the safe transferred to her own sari's hem. She was very artful and cunning by nature and could act with a long thought for the future. But here she had committed one great and fundamental error: she had failed to see that once the seed of distrust is sown in the mind of the trustful, the sower too is as much exposed as others to the suspicion created by him for his own selfish ends; he cannot keep away from himself the consequences of his sowing. The mind poisoned learns to suspect enemies but loses equally its faith in friends.

Thus the very moment Siddheswari lost confidence in Saila, she learnt also to look with suspicion upon Nayantara.

XX

HOWEVER grievous the loss one has suffered, no human being can go on grieving over it for ever. The emptiness of Siddheswari's bed began gradually to fill up little by little. She who could not bear even to tread anywhere near what was once Saila's room, now crossed its verandah with the utmost ease of mind, not even once thinking of her. She was at first constantly anxious and full of manifold devices for getting news of Kanai and Patal : now half of the anxiety was gone. Thus a whole year revolved in its circle of joy and sorrow.

The other day it had suddenly come to her ear that for the past six months litigation about their estate in the village had been going on with Ramesh. Harish himself was leading the case on their side. Civil suits were a constant quantity, but on top of them a criminal prosecution or two had already gone through the courts. The news filled her with anxiety and fear.

That evening, knowing that there was no chance of her curiosity being appeased by any information she could glean from her husband, she came to Harish.

"What is this I hear, Harish?" she said.
"Ramesh is carrying on litigation with us?"

"It is precisely what is happening, sister,"

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replied Harish with a superior smile. Siddheswari's face turned livid. "I cannot believe it," she exclaimed. "The sun and the moon are still rising in the heavens!"*

Nayantara who was sitting on one side of the bed, putting her little Khendi to sleep, intervened, low of voice :

"It is what they are doing, sister ! And was it not to this brother-in-law that you gave thousands to get him started in business ? That money was not spent *then* : it is being spent *now*."

"But why a law-suit ?" asked Siddheswari after a brief silence of astonished stupor.

"Why ?" replied Harish. "Well, I saw that there was no way out except by bringing a case. Our best property is village property. I saw that when we are gone, our Moni, Hari, Bipin, Khendi will not only be deprived of all, even the tiniest patch of land there, but they will perhaps not be allowed to enter our village home. Just think, sister, whatever we have in our village, they have taken possession of as their own by right. They are collecting the taxes, eating, drinking,—but they don't once dream of sending us a farthing. All our property there has been acquired by Girish, yet they would vouchsafe to him not even a reply to his letters—such an ingrate is this fellow, Ramesh. I have vowed that I will drive

* That is to say, such a monstrosity would be conceivable only when the sun and the moon would cease to rise, but not before.

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him out of the house—till then I won't take rest."

"But where will they go with the children then?" asked Siddheswari after a brief silence.

"That is none of our business," retorted Harish.

"What did your brother say to it?" asked Siddheswari.

"If he were what he should be, sister," said Harish, "all would be plain sailing. It was only when I drove it home to him that Ramesh who had been fed and nurtured by him, was creating difficulties over his own property with his own money, that he gave his consent. Why, in the criminal case Ramesh tried actually to implicate Girish himself! I got it dismissed after no end of trouble."

"Well," said Nayantara, in a whisper, "Ramesh is no doubt to blame, but I wonder, sister, how Saila came to give her consent to such a thing as that. The rest of us may be all that is wicked and perverse, but at least she knows her benefactor's fine nature. What happiness could she get by putting him into jail?"

A shiver ran through Siddheswari's body from head to foot. Without speaking another word she left the room.

XXI

GIRISH was busy with his work as always. But to-day when he looked up at his wife's face, her unnatural pallor struck even his eyes.

"When did the fever come?" he asked putting aside the paper he held in his hand.

"It is something, at least, that you have once in a way asked about me," said Siddheswari in a tone of sentimental offence.

"What do you mean?" said Girish hurriedly. "You think I don't? Why, only the day before yesterday, I was saying to Moni: 'Moni, do you give your mother her medicines regularly?' But children in these days have become impossible—they have no regard even for their own parents."

"Don't go on telling lies like this in your old age," she answered, nettled. "It is over two weeks since Moni left for Allahabad on a visit to your sister, and you say you spoke to him only the day before yesterday! Is it likely that you would start doing today what you have never cared to do all your life? It is not that: I have come about something else. I want to know what is all this—what are these law-suits with Ramesh?"

Girish burst out into high wrath: "He is a thief, a thief!" he shouted. "He has turned into a ne'er-do-well and a rogue! He has laid waste

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all our property. Unless I drive him out the last shreds of decency will vanish, it will become a most scandalous affair— he has pulled down all and left only a wreck and ruin.”

“Well, let us grant all that,” said Siddheswari. “One cannot carry on a law-suit with nothing— money is needed, I suppose? From where is he getting the money?”

Harish had just descended on his way to the children’s study, but attracted by his brother’s loud vociferation, he had stepped softly into the room. It was he who replied for Girish.

“Only just now Nayan told you where he got the money from. On the pretext of jute-broking he had taken four thousand from Girish and that is still in his hands. But on top of that all, the money was in the charge of Saila all along. You can very well guess the rest.”

Girish again burst out into excited invectives. “He has taken away all I had,” he cried. “Indeed, has he left anything behind at all, Harish? Why, the fellow has gone brainless and graceless past redemption. Only last Friday he comes to me at the Court and tells me that he has to repair the house from top to bottom and must have five hundred rupees for it.”

Harish was astounded. “Is it possible? The fellow has some cheek!”

“Check! I should think so!” echoed Girish.

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“And what a long bill : this must be repaired, that must be rebuilt, here alterations are indispensable, there something must absolutely be done. And is it only that, do you think ? No, there are household-needs that are falling short, clothes to be bought, paddy, potatoes to be purchased—a hundred items of expenses like that ; for these he needs, if you please, three hundred rupees more !”

“He is lost to all shame,” was all Harish could say. But he swallowed with difficulty an almost uncontrollable rage.

“Exactly !” echoed Girish. “The wretched fellow, he is utterly without shame—utterly—utterly ! He would not leave hold of me until he had got away with the eight hundred rupees he wanted.”

“He took them ! You gave him ?”

“Do you think he would have left me in peace if I hadn’t ?” said Girish. “He simply would not get up till he had got the full sum out of me.”

The whole face of Harish became at first like a sheet of flame, then it faded in a moment to an ashy colour. He sat for a while in complete silence, then spoke :

“If it is like that, what use is there at all in suing him, brother ?”

“No use, no use at all,” agreed Girish at once. “The ill-starred rogue hasn’t got even the capa-

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city to maintain his own family—so worthless has he become. I hear he has been carrying on gloriously in his sitting-room with a merry-crew, cards and dice, day and night, and eat and sleep—just that all the time. It's like when people instal the image of Siva in a temple. You know, we have put him up there, like that ! You see what I mean, Harish ?”

He burst into a wildly joyous appreciation of his own wit, filling the room with shouts of his loud and deep laughter.

Harish could bear it no more ; he rose and went out very quietly, muttering between his teeth : “ Very well, we shall see ! I will look to it myself —alone.”

XXII

THE twenty-second of the month had been fixed for the hearing of the case. On the twentieth, on the occasion of the marriage of a girl, one of Girish's village relatives, the bride's father caught hold of Girish and began to press him ; “ Girish, it is my heart's wish that you should be present and preside over the giving away of my daughter. At least for one day you must come to your native village.”

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The word "No" was one that never had the smallest chance of issuing out of Girish's mouth. He consented at once: "Of course, I will go, brother,—I will surely go, rest assured."

The bride's father departed, satisfied with the assurance. But Siddheswari knew better than anyone what hue of meaning in actual practice this word "surely" was likely to take on at the psychological moment. So, although on the fixed day the husband had forgotten all about his pledge, the wife reminded him of it.

On the morning of the twentieth when she reminded him, Girish fell from the clouds; he stared aghast at his wife.

"What are you saying?" he cried, "to-day it is my Jaypur forgery case!"

"That won't do. You must and shall go to the wedding. From the day you were called to the Bar you have been telling nothing but lies. Keep a promise just once—for a change. Have you no fear at all for your hereafter?"

"My hereafter?" said Girish, in much embarrassment. "Yes, of course, of course, but—"

"No, excuses will not serve you; you have just got to go. So now, go!"

There was no loophole of escape.

At the moment of his departure Siddheswari said to him in a very soft and low voice, "The two children"—and all at once burst into tears.

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"All right, all right, it shall be done" he promised her and left, though neither the husband nor the wife had the faintest conception of what it was that would be done.

Nayantara pressed on Siddheswari's arm a confidential finger, beckoned her aside and said: "Why didn't you tell him not to eat anything at their house?"

"Why should I?" asked Siddheswari in great surprise.

"Who can say, sister," said Nayantara putting an ominous significance into the lines of her face—a grimace that hinted a possible poisoning.

The tears were still flowing from Siddheswari's eyes. She wiped them and after a moment's silence looked full at Nayantara. "*That* you are capable of, Nayan, but Saila could never do it—not even to save her throat from the knife." So saying, she hurried away.

XXIII

RAMESH was making ready in his room to go to the District Court a day or two ahead of the date of hearing so as to arrange the defence of his case. Saila was not there. She was in the temple inside the precincts of their house. She

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had taken off her last ornament from her body and there, kneeling with folded hands, she was praying within herself to the deity :

“Lord ! I have nothing left. Now in whatever way grant me the grace of your deliverance. My children are starving, my husband is reduced to a skeleton by care and trouble—”

“O Keno—O Patli—”

Saila started up. This surely was Girish's voice ! She looked out through the half-open window : yes, it was he ! The white hair, the grey moustache—the old familiar tranquil, genial and noble figure—just as she had known him always, ever the same. No change had taken place in any single feature. Kanai left his studies and ran and made his obeisance ; Patal left his play and presented himself in a rush, panting for breath. Girish took him up in his arms.

Ramesh came out of his room, bowed and took the dust of his feet.

“Where are you going at this time of the day ?” asked Girish.

“To the District Court—” Ramesh was interrupted in his embarrassed and almost inarticulate reply—for Girish in the flash of a moment exploded like gun-powder.

“Wretch,” he cried, “you live on me and make cases against me ! I won't give you a farthing's worth of my property. Out of my house ! Out

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this very instant—not a minute's delay! Go as you are, with only one cloth upon you."

Ramesh said nothing; he did not even lift his face, but went away just as he had come. Deeply as he revered and adored his elder brother, he knew him too very intimately and was well aware that such tirades never meant anything; so he went away making no defence, no protest.

Saila came out and, with her cloth round her neck in sign of humility, made her obeisance.

"Come, little mother, come" said Girish and blessed her.

There was not a trace of heat or passion in that voice—no one entering the room from outside could possibly have said that this was the same man who had been shouting and fulminating so loudly only a moment ago.

Girish had never been observant—nothing ever seemed to catch his eye; but to-day, unaccountably, his vision suddenly acquired an astonishing penetration. His look remained fixed on Saila: "How is it I see no ornaments on you, little mother?"

Saila only stood there very still, looking downward.

Then the pitch of Girish's voice rose once again from the lower to a higher and yet higher key:

"So! I see that this ill-omened rascal has sold all your ornaments and swallowed everything. To

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whom do they belong ? They were mine ! I will see him in jail before I leave him off—”

XXIV

ON the afternoon of the twenty-second of the month—the date of the final hearing—Harish returned from the Hugli Court with a long and dark face and without even doffing his advocate’s robe flung himself on his bed, taking no notice of all those who had assembled there to hear the verdict.

Nayantara, on the verge of tears, assailed him with a thousand questions. Siddheswari, when informed, came running. But Harish lay mute on one side with his back turned to all : not even a hundred interrogations could extort from him a single answer.

There could be no possible doubt that they had lost the case. Those present began to pour out a stream of persuasion and consolations : that in law-suits one must expect sometimes defeat as well as victory, that there was still the High Court and beyond it lay an appeal to the Privy Council, that there was no good reason whatever for breaking down in this way at so early a stage, etc. etc.

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But strangely, while these lay advisers were so full of hope and confidence, Harish, himself a lawyer, reflected not one ray of their optimism.

At last Siddheswari could bear it no longer; seizing Harish's hand she cried out: "I tell you, Harish, you are not going to lose your case. I will give you all the money you need; file an appeal in the High Court. I bless you that you shall surely win."

Then at last Harish turned his face towards them.

"No, sister," he said, with a shake of his head, "that cannot be—all is over. High Court or Privy Council, no way is left for us. All our village property was in brother's name; when he went to that marriage over there, he conveyed it all by a deed of gift to Saila and, even, the document has already been registered. There is no way open to us any longer by which we can turn our faces to our village home."

All sat as though petrified, staring at each other.

The scene that took place that evening on Girish's return from the Court baffles all attempts at description. Senseless, crazy, senile: every discoverable epithet of contempt was rained on him from every side—none failed to put in his word of contumely.

But Girish stood firm against all; he held to his

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own case arguing and explaining persistently that there was absolutely no other way out except this. Ramesh, the scoundrel, the rascal, the vagabond, had sold all the ornaments of Saila and eaten up the proceeds ; he would soon have sold off the very brick and mortar of the house itself to the same end and so the last vestige of their ancestral home would have been wiped out of existence. It was after the most careful reflection, after studying and pondering over every side of the question, that he had found out this solution and delivered the Chatterji family from utter ship-wreck.

Siddheswari alone had sat silent all this time on one side out of the tumult ; she had uttered no word, good or evil, in support of either party. But when all had taken their departure, she rose and stood facing her husband. In her eyes there was a tremulous brightness of unshed tears as she kneeled and, laying her head on his feet, took the dust and put it on her head.

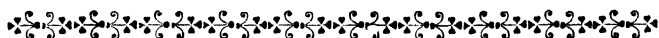
“To-day forgive me,” she said slowly. “Yes, they have gone after throwing at you, each of them, all the terms of abuse they could think of, but I have seen to-day as I never saw before how much nobler you are than all of them—not one among them can ever stand beside you.”

Girish nodded his head in great jubilation and said again and again :

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“So you can see at last, wife, what a vigilant eye I keep on everything around me ! Did you think that Ramesh, a stripling of yesterday, could throw dust in my eyes and wreck the property I have earned with so much difficulty and labour ? No ! I have tied up everything so skilfully that not all the young rascal’s cunning can serve him to move so much as a single knot.”

He found, presumably, something deeply entertaining hidden in his own words : for the whole room up to its very doors and shutters was full of the uproar of his laughter.



DILIP KUMAR ROY, the only son of the great Bengali poet and dramatist, the late DWIJENDRA LAL ROY, is well known as a poet and musician of profound originality. He was a distinguished student of the Calcutta University, graduating with first class honours in mathematics in 1918 at the age of twenty-one. Immediately he went to Europe where he toured all over the Continent studying Western music. On returning to India in 1922 he undertook a musical pilgrimage across this vast peninsula.

Belonging as he does to one of the richest and most cultured families of Bengal, he made Calcutta the Centre of his musical activities. There his name is a household word. Of a highly thoughtful and sensitive temperament, he was gradually drawn to SRI AUROBINDO'S famous Yoga-Asram at Pondicherry, to which he dedicated all his property and income. Within the luminous seclusion of the Asram he has been cultivating the musical and literary arts. In his poems and novels we find an extraordinary response to the appeal of beauty. He has an enthralling voice and through him music has penetrated into every Bengali household. According

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to PROF. DHURJATI PRASAD MUKERJI, “in no account of the recent cultural history of music can his influence be ignored. He was the supreme missionary of music, so long as he belonged to music.”

DILIP KUMAR is a friend of ROMAIN ROLLAND MAHATMA GANDHI, RABINDRANATH TAGORE and BERTRAND RUSSELL and a disciple of SRI AUROBINDO. His conversations with them have been recently published in Bengali under the title of *TIRTHANKAR* and will be shortly made available in English with his other works.

